

Creepy and Spooky

Tales For A Summer Campfire Or A Stormy Night



brooklynmuseum-o416i000-32.849_reference_SL1 Stormy Day

THE SIN-EATER

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *The Best Psychic Stories*, by Various
By Fiona Macleod

SIN.

_Taste this bread, this substance: tell me
Is it bread or flesh?_

[_The Senses approach._]

THE SMELL.

_Its smell
Is the smell of bread._

SIN.

_Touch, come. Why tremble?
Say what's this thou touchest?_

THE TOUCH.

Bread.

SIN.

_Sight, declare what thou discernest
In this object._

THE SIGHT.

Bread alone.

--CALDERON,
Los Encantos de la Culpa

A wet wind out of the south mazed and mooned through the sea-mist that hung over the Ross. In all the bays and creeks was a continuous weary lapping of water. There was no other sound anywhere.

Thus was it at daybreak; it was thus at noon; thus was it now in the darkening of the day. A confused thrusting and falling of sounds through the silence betokened the hour of the setting. Curlews wailed in the mist; on the seething limpet-covered rocks the skuas and terns screamed, or uttered hoarse, rasping cries. Ever and again the prolonged note of the oyster-catcher shrilled against the air, as an echo flying blindly along a blank wall of cliff. Out of weedy places, wherein the tide sobbed with long, gurgling moans, came at intervals the barking of a seal.

Inland, by the hamlet of Contullich, there is a reedy tarn called the Loch-a-chaoruinn.[10] By the shores of this mournful water a man moved. It was a slow, weary walk that of the man Neil Ross. He had come from Duninch, thirty miles to the eastward, and had not rested foot, nor eaten, nor had word of man or woman, since his going west an hour after dawn.

[Footnote 10: Contullich: i.e. Ceann-nan-tulaich, "the end of the hillocks." Loch a chaoruinn means the loch of the rowan-trees.]

At the bend of the loch nearest the clachan he came upon an old woman carrying peat. To his reiterated question as to where he was, and if the tarn were Feur-Lochan above Fionnaphort that is on the strait of Iona on the west side of the Ross of Mull, she did not at first make any answer. The rain trickled down her withered brown face, over which the thin gray locks hung limply. It was only in the deep-set eyes that the flame of life still glimmered, though that dimly.

The man had used the English when first he spoke, but as though

mechanically. Supposing that he had not been understood, he repeated his question in the Gaelic.

After a minute's silence the old woman answered him in the native tongue, but only to put a question in return.

"I am thinking it is a long time since you have been in Iona?"

The man stirred uneasily.

"And why is that, mother?" he asked, in a weak voice hoarse with damp and fatigue; "how is it you will be knowing that I have been in Iona at all?"

"Because I knew your kith and kin there, Neil Ross."

"I have not been hearing that name, mother, for many a long year. And as for the old face o' you, it is unbeknown to me."

"I was at the naming of you, for all that. Well do I remember the day that Silis Macallum gave you birth; and I was at the house on the croft of Ballyrona when Murtagh Ross--that was your father--laughed. It was an ill laughing that."

"I am knowing it. The curse of God on him!"

"'Tis not the first, nor the last, though the grass is on his head three years ago now."

"You that know who I am will be knowing that I have no kith or kin now on Iona?"

"Ay; they are all under gray stone or running wave. Donald your brother, and Murtagh your next brother, and little Silis, and your mother Silis herself, and your two brothers of your father, Angus and Ian Macallum, and your father Murtagh Ross, and his lawful childless wife, Dionaid, and his sister Anna--one and all, they lie beneath the green wave or in the brown mould. It is said there is a curse upon all who live at Ballyrona. The owl builds now in the rafters, and it is the big sea-rat that runs across the fireless hearth."

"It is there I am going."

"The foolishness is on you, Neil Ross."

"Now it is that I am knowing who you are. It is old Sheen Macarthur I am speaking to."

"Tha mise ... it is I."

"And you will be alone now, too, I am thinking, Sheen?"

"I am alone. God took my three boys at the one fishing ten years ago; and before there was moonrise in the blackness of my heart my man went. It was after the drowning of Anndra that my croft was taken from me. Then I crossed the Sound, and shared with my widow sister Elsie McVurie till she went; and then the two cows had to go; and I had no rent, and was old."

In the silence that followed, the rain dribbled from the sodden bracken and dripping loneroid. Big tears rolled slowly down the deep lines on the face of Sheen. Once there was a sob in her throat, but she put her shaking hand to it, and it was still.

Neil Ross shifted from foot to foot. The ooze in that marshy place squelched with each restless movement he made. Beyond them a plover wheeled, a blurred splatch in the mist, crying its mournful cry over and over and over.

It was a pitiful thing to hear--ah, bitter loneliness, bitter patience of poor old women. That he knew well. But he was too weary, and his heart was nigh full of its own burthen. The words could not come to his lips. But at last he spoke.

"Tha mo chridhe goirt," he said, with tears in his voice, as he put his hand on her bent shoulder; "my heart is sore."

She put up her old face against his.

"S tha e ruidhinn mo chridhe," she whispered; "it is touching my heart you are."

After that they walked on slowly through the dripping mist, each dumb and brooding deep.

"Where will you be staying this night?" asked Sheen suddenly, when they had traversed a wide boggy stretch of land; adding, as by an afterthought--"Ah, it is asking you were if the tarn there were Feur-Lochan. No; it is Loch-a-chaorunn, and the clachan that is near is Contullich."

"Which way?"

"Yonder, to the right."

"And you are not going there?"

"No. I am going to the steading of Andrew Blair. Maybe you are for

knowing it? It is called the Baile-na-Chlais-nambuidheag."[11]

[Footnote 11: "The farm in the hollow of the yellow flowers."]

"I do not remember. But it is remembering a Blair I am. He was Adam, the son of Adam, the son of Robert. He and my father did many an ill deed together."

"Ay, to the stones be it said. Sure, now, there was, even till this weary day, no man or woman who had a good word for Adam Blair."

"And why that ... why till this day?"

"It is not yet the third hour since he went into the silence."

Neil Ross uttered a sound like a stifled curse. For a time he trudged wearily on.

"Then I am too late," he said at last, but as though speaking to himself. "I had hoped to see him face to face again, and curse him between the eyes. It was he who made Murtagh Ross break his troth to my mother, and marry that other woman, barren at that, God be praised! And they say ill of him, do they?"

"Ay, it is evil that is upon him. This crime and that, God knows; and the shadow of murder on his brow and in his eyes. Well, well, 'tis ill to be speaking of a man in corpse, and that near by. 'Tis Himself only that knows, Neil Ross."

"Maybe ay and maybe no. But where is it that I can be sleeping this night, Sheen Macarthur?"

"They will not be taking a stranger at the farm this night of the nights, I am thinking. There is no place else for seven miles yet, when there is the clachan, before you will be coming to Fionnaphort. There is the warm byre, Neil, my man; or, if you can bide by my peats, you may rest, and welcome, though there is no bed for you, and no food either save some of the porridge that is over."

"And that will do well enough for me, Sheen; and Himself bless you for it."

And so it was.

* * * * *

After old Sheen Macarthur had given the wayfarer food--poor food at that, but welcome to one nigh starved, and for the heartsome way it was given, and because of the thanks to God that was upon it before even

spoon was lifted--she told him a lie. It was the good lie of tender love.

"Sure now, after all, Neil, my man," she said, "it is sleeping at the farm I ought to be, for Maisie Macdonald, the wise woman, will be sitting by the corpse, and there will be none to keep her company. It is there I must be going; and if I am weary, there is a good bed for me just beyond the dead-board, which I am not minding at all. So, if it is tired you are sitting by the peats, lie down on my bed there, and have the sleep; and God be with you."

With that she went, and soundlessly, for Neil Ross was already asleep, where he sat on an upturned claar, with his elbows on his knees, and his flame-lit face in his hands.

The rain had ceased; but the mist still hung over the land, though in thin veils now, and these slowly drifting seaward. Sheen stepped wearily along the stony path that led from her bothy to the farm-house. She stood still once, the fear upon her, for she saw three or four blurred yellow gleams moving beyond her, eastward, along the dyke. She knew what they were--the corpse-lights that on the night of death go between the bier and the place of burial. More than once she had seen them before the last hour, and by that token had known the end to be near.

Good Catholic that she was, she crossed herself, and took heart. Then muttering

"Crois nan naoi aingeal leam
'O mhullach mo chinn
Gu craican mo bhonn."

(The cross of the nine angels be about me,
From the top of my head
To the soles of my feet),

she went on her way fearlessly.

When she came to the White House, she entered by the milk-shed that was between the byre and the kitchen. At the end of it was a paved place, with washing-tubs. At one of these stood a girl that served in the house--an ignorant lass called Jessie McFall, out of Oban. She was ignorant, indeed, not to know that to wash clothes with a newly dead body near by was an ill thing to do. Was it not a matter for the knowing that the corpse could hear, and might rise up in the night and clothe itself in a clean white shroud?

She was still speaking to the lassie when Maisie Macdonald, the deid-watcher, opened the door of the room behind the kitchen to see who it was that was come. The two old women nodded silently. It was not till

Sheen was in the closed room, midway in which something covered with a sheet lay on a board, that any word was spoken.

"Duit sìth mòr, Beann Macdonald."

"And deep peace to you, too, Sheen; and to him that is there."

"Och, ochone, mise 'n diugh; 'tis a dark hour this."

"Ay; it is bad. Will you have been hearing or seeing anything?"

"Well, as for that, I am thinking I saw lights moving betwixt here and the green place over there."

"The corpse-lights?"

"Well, it is calling them that they are."

"I _thought_ they would be out. And I have been hearing the noise of the planks--the cracking of the boards, you know, that will be used for the coffin to-morrow."

A long silence followed. The old women had seated themselves by the corpse, their cloaks over their heads. The room was fireless, and was lit only by a tall wax death-candle, kept against the hour of the going.

At last Sheen began swaying slowly to and fro, crooning low the while. "I would not be for doing that, Sheen Macarthur," said the deid-watcher in a low voice, but meaningly; adding, after a moment's pause, "_The mice have all left the house_."

Sheen sat upright, a look half of terror, half of awe in her eyes.

"God save the sinful soul that is hiding," she whispered.

Well she knew what Maisie meant. If the soul of the dead be a lost soul it knows its doom. The house of death is the house of sanctuary; but before the dawn that follows the death-night the soul must go forth, whosoever or whatsoever wait for it in the homeless, shelterless plains of air around and beyond. If it be well with the soul, it need have no fear; if it be not ill with the soul, it may fare forth with surety; but if it be ill with the soul, ill will the going be. Thus is it that the spirit of an evil man cannot stay, and yet dare not go; and so it strives to hide itself in secret places anywhere, in dark channels and blind walls; and the wise creatures that live near man smell the terror, and flee. Maisie repeated the saying of Sheen, then, after a silence, added:

"Adam Blair will not lie in his grave for a year and a day because of

the sins that are upon him; and it is knowing that, they are here. He will be the Watcher of the Dead for a year and a day."

"Ay, sure, there will be dark prints in the dawn-dew over yonder."

Once more the old women relapsed into silence. Through the night there was a sighing sound. It was not the sea, which was too far off to be heard save in a day of storm. The wind it was, that was dragging itself across the sodden moors like a wounded thing, moaning and sighing.

Out of sheer weariness, Sheen twice rocked forward from her stool, heavy with sleep. At last Maisie led her over to the niche-bed opposite, and laid her down there, and waited till the deep furrows in the face relaxed somewhat, and the thin breath labored slow across the fallen jaw.

"Poor old woman," she muttered, heedless of her own gray hairs and grayer years; "a bitter, bad thing it is to be old, old and weary. 'Tis the sorrow, that. God keep the pain of it!"

As for herself, she did not sleep at all that night, but sat between the living and the dead, with her plaid shrouding her. Once, when Sheen gave a low, terrified scream in her sleep, she rose, and in a loud voice cried, "_Sheeach-ad! Away with you!_" And with that she lifted the shroud from the dead man, and took the pennies off the eyelids, and lifted each lid; then, staring into these filmed wells, muttered an ancient incantation that would compel the soul of Adam Blair to leave the spirit of Sheen alone, and return to the cold corpse that was its coffin till the wood was ready.

The dawn came at last. Sheen slept, and Adam Blair slept a deeper sleep, and Maisie stared out of her wan, weary eyes against the red and stormy flares of light that came into the sky.

When, an hour after sunrise, Sheen Macarthur reached her bothy, she found Neil Ross, heavy with slumber, upon her bed. The fire was not out, though no flame or spark was visible; but she stooped and blew at the heart of the peats till the redness came, and once it came it grew. Having done this, she kneeled and said a rune of the morning, and after that a prayer, and then a prayer for the poor man Neil. She could pray no more because of the tears. She rose and put the meal and water into the pot for the porridge to be ready against his awaking. One of the hens that was there came and pecked at her ragged skirt. "Poor beastie," she said. "Sure, that will just be the way I am pulling at the white robe of the Mother o' God. 'Tis a bit meal for you, cluckie, and for me a healing hand upon my tears. O, och, ochone, the tears, the tears!"

It was not till the third hour after sunrise of that bleak day in that winter of the winters, that Neil Ross stirred and arose. He ate in

silence. Once he said that he smelt the snow coming out of the north. Sheen said no word at all.

After the porridge, he took his pipe, but there was no tobacco. All that Sheen had was the pipeful she kept against the gloom of the Sabbath. It was her one solace in the long weary week. She gave him this, and held a burning peat to his mouth, and hungered over the thin, rank smoke that curled upward.

It was within half-an-hour of noon that, after an absence, she returned.

"Not between you and me, Neil Ross," she began abruptly, "but just for the asking, and what is beyond. Is it any money you are having upon you?"

"No."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Then how will you be getting across to Iona? It is seven long miles to Fionnaphort, and bitter cold at that, and you will be needing food, and then the ferry, the ferry across the Sound, you know."

"Ay, I know."

"What would you do for a silver piece, Neil, my man?"

"You have none to give me, Sheen Macarthur; and, if you had, it would not be taking it I would."

"Would you kiss a dead man for a crown-piece--a crown-piece of five good shillings?"

Neil Ross stared. Then he sprang to his feet.

"It is Adam Blair you are meaning, woman! God curse him in death now that he is no longer in life!"

Then, shaking and trembling, he sat down again, and brooded against the dull red glow of the peats.

But, when he rose, in the last quarter before noon, his face was white.

"The dead are dead, Sheen Macarthur. They can know or do nothing. I will do it. It is willed. Yes, I am going up to the house there. And now I am going from here. God Himself has my thanks to you, and my blessing too. They will come back to you. It is not forgetting you I will be.

Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Neil, son of the woman that was my friend. A south wind to you! Go up by the farm. In the front of the house you will see what you will be seeing. Maisie Macdonald will be there. She will tell you what's for the telling. There is no harm in it, sure; sure, the dead are dead. It is praying for you I will be, Neil Ross. Peace to you!"

"And to you, Sheen."

And with that the man went.

* * * * *

When Neil Ross reached the byres of the farm in the wide hollow, he saw two figures standing as though awaiting him, but separate, and unseen of the other. In front of the house was a man he knew to be Andrew Blair; behind the milk-shed was a woman he guessed to be Maisie Macdonald.

It was the woman he came upon first.

"Are you the friend of Sheen Macarthur?" she asked in a whisper, as she beckoned him to the doorway.

"I am."

"I am knowing no names or anything. And no one here will know you, I am thinking. So do the thing and begone."

"There is no harm to it?"

"None."

"It will be a thing often done, is it not?"

"Ay, sure."

"And the evil does not abide?"

"No. The ... the ... person ... the person takes them away, and...."

"_Them?_"

"For sure, man! Them ... the sins of the corpse. He takes them away; and are you for thinking God would let the innocent suffer for the guilty? No ... the person ... the Sin-Eater, you know ... takes them away on himself, and one by one the air of heaven washes them away till he, the Sin-Eater, is clean and whole as before."

"But if it is a man you hate ... if it is a corpse that is the corpse of one who has been a curse and a foe ... if...."

"_Sst!_ Be still now with your foolishness. It is only an idle saying, I am thinking. Do it, and take the money and go. It will be hell enough for Adam Blair, miser as he was, if he is for knowing that five good shillings of his money are to go to a passing tramp because of an old, ancient silly tale."

Neil Ross laughed low at that. It was for pleasure to him.

"Hush wi' ye! Andrew Blair is waiting round there. Say that I have sent you round, as I have neither bite nor bit to give."

Turning on his heel, Neil walked slowly round to the front of the house. A tall man was there, gaunt and brown, with hairless face and lank brown hair, but with eyes cold and gray as the sea.

"Good day to you, an' good faring. Will you be passing this way to anywhere?"

"Health to you. I am a stranger here. It is on my way to Iona I am. But I have the hunger upon me. There is not a brown bit in my pocket. I asked at the door there, near the byres. The woman told me she could give me nothing--not a penny even, worse luck--nor, for that, a drink of warm milk. 'Tis a sore land this."

"You have the Gaelic of the Isles. Is it from Iona you are?"

"It is from the Isles of the West I come."

"From Tiree ... from Coll?"

"No."

"From the Long Island ... or from Uist ... or maybe from Benbecula?"

"No."

"Oh well, sure it is no matter to me. But may I be asking your name?"

"Macallum."

"Do you know there is a death here, Macallum?"

"If I didn't I would know it now, because of what lies yonder."

Mechanically Andrew Blair looked round. As he knew, a rough bier was there, that was made of a dead-board laid upon three milking-stools.

Beside it was a claar, a small tub to hold potatoes. On the bier was a corpse, covered with a canvas sheeting that looked like a sail.

"He was a worthy man, my father," began the son of the dead man, slowly; "but he had his faults, like all of us. I might even be saying that he had his sins, to the Stones be it said. You will be knowing, Macallum, what is thought among the folk ... that a stranger, passing by, may take away the sins of the dead, and that, too, without any hurt whatever ... any hurt whatever."

"Ay, sure."

"And you will be knowing what is done?"

"Ay."

"With the bread ... and the water...?"

"Ay."

"It is a small thing to do. It is a Christian thing. I would be doing it myself, and that gladly, but the ... the ... passer-by who...."

"It is talking of the Sin-Eater you are?"

"Yes, yes, for sure. The Sin-Eater as he is called--and a good Christian act it is, for all that the ministers and the priests make a frowning at it--the Sin-Eater must be a stranger. He must be a stranger, and should know nothing of the dead man--above all, bear him no grudge."

At that Neil Ross's eyes lightened for a moment.

"And why that?"

"Who knows? I have heard this, and I have heard that. If the Sin-Eater was hating the dead man he could take the sins and fling them into the sea, and they would be changed into demons of the air that would harry the flying soul till Judgment-Day."

"And how would that thing be done?"

The man spoke with flashing eyes and parted lips, the breath coming swift. Andrew Blair looked at him suspiciously; and hesitated, before, in a cold voice, he spoke again.

"That is all folly, I am thinking, Macallum. Maybe it is all folly, the whole of it. But, see here, I have no time to be talking with you. If you will take the bread and the water you shall have a good meal if you want it, and ... and ... yes, look you, my man, I will be giving you a

shilling too, for luck."

"I will have no meal in this house, Anndramhic-Adam; nor will I do this thing unless you will be giving me two silver half-crowns. That is the sum I must have, or no other."

"Two half-crowns! Why, man, for one half-crown...."

"Then be eating the sins o' your father yourself, Andrew Blair! It is going I am."

"Stop, man! Stop, Macallum. See here--I will be giving you what you ask."

"So be it. Is the.... Are you ready?"

"Ay, come this way."

With that the two men turned and moved slowly towards the bier.

In the doorway of the house stood a man and two women; farther in, a woman; and at the window to the left, the serving-wench, Jessie McFall, and two men of the farm. Of those in the doorway, the man was Peter, the half-witted youngest brother of Andrew Blair; the taller and older woman was Catreen, the widow of Adam, the second brother; and the thin, slight woman, with staring eyes and drooping mouth, was Muireall, the wife of Andrew. The old woman behind these was Maisie Macdonald.

Andrew Blair stooped and took a saucer out of the claar. This he put upon the covered breast of the corpse. He stooped again, and brought forth a thick square piece of new-made bread. That also he placed upon the breast of the corpse. Then he stooped again, and with that he emptied a spoonful of salt alongside the bread.

"I must see the corpse," said Neil Ross simply.

"It is not needful, Macallum."

"I must be seeing the corpse, I tell you--and for that, too, the bread and the water should be on the naked breast."

"No, no, man; it...."

But here a voice, that of Maisie the wise woman, came upon them, saying that the man was right, and that the eating of the sins should be done in that way and no other.

With an ill grace the son of the dead man drew back the sheeting. Beneath it, the corpse was in a clean white shirt, a death-gown long ago

prepared, that covered him from his neck to his feet, and left only the dusky yellowish face exposed.

While Andrew Blair unfastened the shirt and placed the saucer and the bread and the salt on the breast, the man beside him stood staring fixedly on the frozen features of the corpse. The new laird had to speak to him twice before he heard.

"I am ready. And you, now? What is it you are muttering over against the lips of the dead?"

"It is giving him a message I am. There is no harm in that, sure?"

"Keep to your own folk, Macallum. You are from the West you say, and we are from the North. There can be no messages between you and a Blair of Strathmore, no messages for _you_ to be giving."

"He that lies here knows well the man to whom I am sending a message"--and at this response Andrew Blair scowled darkly. He would fain have sent the man about his business, but he feared he might get no other.

"It is thinking I am that you are not a Macallum at all. I know all of that name in Mull, Iona, Skye, and the near isles. What will the name of your naming be, and of your father, and of his place?"

Whether he really wanted an answer, or whether he sought only to divert the man from his procrastination, his question had a satisfactory result.

"Well, now, it's ready I am, Anndra-mhic-Adam."

With that, Andrew Blair stooped once more and from the claar brought a small jug of water. From this he filled the saucer.

"You know what to say and what to do, Macallum."

There was not one there who did not have a shortened breath because of the mystery that was now before them, and the fearfulness of it. Neil Ross drew himself up, erect, stiff, with white, drawn face. All who waited, save Andrew Blair, thought that the moving of his lips was because of the prayer that was slipping upon them, like the last lapsing of the ebb-tide. But Blair was watching him closely, and knew that it was no prayer which stole out against the blank air that was around the dead.

Slowly Neil Ross extended his right arm. He took a pinch of the salt and put it in the saucer, then took another pinch and sprinkled it upon the bread. His hand shook for a moment as he touched the saucer. But there

was no shaking as he raised it towards his lips, or when he held it before him when he spoke.

"With this water that has salt in it, and has lain on thy corpse, O Adam mhic Anndra mhic Adam Mòr, I drink away all the evil that is upon thee...."

There was throbbing silence while he paused.

"... And may it be upon me and not upon thee, if with this water it cannot flow away."

Thereupon, he raised the saucer and passed it thrice round the head of the corpse sunways; and, having done this, lifted it to his lips and drank as much as his mouth would hold. Thereafter he poured the remnant over his left hand, and let it trickle to the ground. Then he took the piece of bread. Thrice, too, he passed it round the head of the corpse sunways.

He turned and looked at the man by his side, then at the others, who watched him with beating hearts.

With a loud clear voice he took the sins.

"_ Thoir dhomh do ciontachd, O Adam mhic Anndra mhic Adam Mòr! _ Give me thy sins to take away from thee! Lo, now, as I stand here, I break this bread that has lain on thee in corpse, and I am eating it, I am, and in that eating I take upon me the sins of thee, O man that was alive and is now white with the stillness!"

Thereupon Neil Ross broke the bread and ate of it, and took upon himself the sins of Adam Blair that was dead. It was a bitter swallowing, that. The remainder of the bread he crumbled in his hand, and threw it on the ground, and trod upon it. Andrew Blair gave a sigh of relief. His cold eyes lightened with malice.

"Be off with you, now, Macallum. We are wanting no tramps at the farm here, and perhaps you had better not be trying to get work this side Iona; for it is known as the Sin-Eater you will be, and that won't be for the helping, I am thinking! There--there are the two half-crowns for you ... and may they bring you no harm, you that are _Scapegoat_ now!"

The Sin-Eater turned at that, and stared like a hill-bull. _Scapegoat!_ Ay, that's what he was. Sin-Eater, Scapegoat! Was he not, too, another Judas, to have sold for silver that which was not for the selling? No, no, for sure Maisie Macdonald could tell him the rune that would serve for the easing of this burden. He would soon be quit of it.

Slowly he took the money, turned it over, and put it in his pocket.

"I am going, Andrew Blair," he said quietly, "I am going now. I will not say to him that is there in the silence, A chuid do Pharas da!--nor will I say to you, Gu'n gleidheadh Dia thu,--nor will I say to this dwelling that is the home of thee and thine, Gu'n beannaic-headh Dia an tigh!"[12]

[Footnote 12: A chuid do Pharas da! "His share of heaven be his." Gu'n gleidheadh Dia thu, "May God preserve you." Gu'n beannaic-headh Dia an tigh! "God's blessing on this house."]

Here there was a pause. All listened. Andrew Blair shifted uneasily, the furtive eyes of him going this way and that, like a ferret in the grass.

"But, Andrew Blair, I will say this: when you fare abroad, _Droch caoidh ort!_ and when you go upon the water, _Gaoth gun direadh ort!_ Ay, ay, Anndra-mhic-Adam, _Dia ad aghaidh 's ad aodann ... agus bas dunach ort!_ Dhonas 's dholas ort, agus leat-sa!_"[13]

[Footnote 13: Droch caoidh ort! "May a fatal accident happen to you" (_lit._ "bad moan on you"). Gaoth gun direadh ort! "May you drift to your drowning" (_lit._ "wind without direction on you"). Dia ad aghaidh, etc., "God against thee and in thy face ... and may a death of woe be yours.... Evil and sorrow to thee and thine!"]

The bitterness of these words was like snow in June upon all there. They stood amazed. None spoke. No one moved.

Neil Ross turned upon his heel, and, with a bright light in his eyes, walked away from the dead and the living. He went by the byres, whence he had come. Andrew Blair remained where he was, now glooming at the corpse, now biting his nails and staring at the damp sods at his feet.

When Neil reached the end of the milk-shed he saw Maisie Macdonald there, waiting.

"These were ill sayings of yours, Neil Ross," she said in a low voice, so that she might not be overheard from the house.

"So, it is knowing me you are."

"Sheen Macarthur told me."

"I have good cause."

"That is a true word. I know it."

"Tell me this thing. What is the rune that is said for the throwing into the sea of the sins of the dead? See here, Maisie Macdonald. There is no

money of that man that I would carry a mile with me. Here it is. It is yours, if you will tell me that rune."

Maisie took the money hesitatingly. Then, stooping, she said slowly the few lines of the old, old rune.

"Will you be remembering that?"

"It is not forgetting it I will be, Maisie."

"Wait a moment. There is some warm milk here."

With that she went, and then, from within, beckoned to him to enter.

"There is no one here, Neil Ross. Drink the milk."

He drank; and while he did so she drew a leather pouch from some hidden place in her dress.

"And now I have this to give you."

She counted out ten pennies and two farthings.

"It is all the coppers I have. You are welcome to them. Take them, friend of my friend. They will give you the food you need, and the ferry across the Sound."

"I will do that, Maisie Macdonald, and thanks to you. It is not forgetting it I will be, nor you, good woman. And now, tell me, is it safe that I am? He called me a 'scapegoat', he, Andrew Blair! Can evil touch me between this and the sea?"

"You must go to the place where the evil was done to you and yours--and that, I know, is on the west side of Iona. Go, and God preserve you. But here, too, is a sian that will be for the safety."

Thereupon, with swift mutterings she said this charm: an old, familiar Sian against Sudden Harm:

"Sian a chuir Moire air Mac ort,
Sian ro' marbhadh, sian ro' lot ort,
Sian eadar a' chlioch 's a' ghlun,
Sian nan Tri ann an aon ort,
O mhullach do chinn gu bonn do chois ort:
Sian seachd eadar a h-aon ort,
Sian seachd eadar a dha ort,
Sian seachd eadar a tri ort,
Sian seachd eadar a ceithir ort,
Sian seachd eadar a coig ort,

Sian seachd eadar a sia ort,
Sian seachd paidir nan seach paidir dol deiseil ri diugh narach ort,
ga do ghleidheadh bho bheud 's bho mhi-thapadh!"

Scarcely had she finished before she heard heavy steps approaching.

"Away with you," she whispered, repeating in a loud, angry tone, "Away with you! _Seachad! Seachad! _"

And with that Neil Ross slipped from the milk-shed and crossed the yard, and was behind the byres before Andrew Blair, with sullen mien and swift, wild eyes, strode from the house.

It was with a grim smile on his face that Neil tramped down the wet heather till he reached the high road, and fared thence as through a marsh because of the rains there had been.

For the first mile he thought of the angry mind of the dead man, bitter at paying of the silver. For the second mile he thought of the evil that had been wrought for him and his. For the third mile he pondered over all that he had heard and done and taken upon him that day.

Then he sat down upon a broken granite heap by the way, and brooded deep till one hour went, and then another, and the third was upon him.

A man driving two calves came towards him out of the west. He did not hear or see. The man stopped; spoke again. Neil gave no answer. The drover shrugged his shoulders, hesitated, and walked slowly on, often looking back.

An hour later a shepherd came by the way he himself had tramped. He was a tall, gaunt man with a squint. The small, pale-blue eyes glittered out of a mass of red hair that almost covered his face. He stood still, opposite Neil, and leaned on his _cromak_.

"Latha math leat," he said at last; "I wish you good day."

Neil glanced at him, but did not speak.

"What is your name, for I seem to know you?"

But Neil had already forgotten him. The shepherd took out his snuff-mull, helped himself, and handed the mull to the lonely wayfarer. Neil mechanically helped himself.

"Am bheil thu 'dol do Fhionphort?" tried the shepherd again: "Are you going to Fionnaphort?"

"Tha mise 'dol a dh' I-challum-chille," Neil answered, in a low, weary

voice, and as a man adream: "I am on my way to Iona."

"I am thinking I know now who you are. You are the man Macallum."

Neil looked, but did not speak. His eyes dreamed against what the other could not see or know. The shepherd called angrily to his dogs to keep the sheep from straying; then, with a resentful air, turned to his victim.

"You are a silent man for sure, you are. I'm hoping it is not the curse upon you already."

"What curse?"

"Ah, _that_ has brought the wind against the mist! I was thinking so!"

"What curse?"

"You are the man that was the Sin-Eater over there?"

"Ay."

"The man Macallum?"

"Ay."

"Strange it is, but three days ago I saw you in Tobermory, and heard you give your name as Neil Ross to an Iona man that was there."

"Well?"

"Oh, sure, it is nothing to me. But they say the Sin-Eater should not be a man with a hidden lump in his pack."^[14]

[Footnote 14: i.e. With a criminal secret, or an undiscovered crime.]

"Why?"

"For the dead know, and are content. There is no shaking off any sins, then--for that man."

"It is a lie."

"Maybe ay and maybe no."

"Well, have you more to be saying to me? I am obliged to you for your company, but it is not needing it I am, though no offense."

"Och, man, there's no offense between you and me. Sure, there's Iona in

me, too; for the father of my father married a woman that was the granddaughter of Tomais Macdonald, who was a fisherman there. No, no; it is rather warning you I would be."

"And for what?"

"Well, well, just because of that laugh I heard about."

"What laugh?"

"The laugh of Adam Blair that is dead."

Neil Ross stared, his eyes large and wild. He leaned a little forward. No word came from him. The look that was on his face was the question.

"Yes, it was this way. Sure, the telling of it is just as I heard it. After you ate the sins of Adam Blair, the people there brought out the coffin. When they were putting him into it, he was as stiff as a sheep dead in the snow--and just like that, too, with his eyes wide open. Well, someone saw you trampling the heather down the slope that is in front of the house, and said, 'It is the Sin-Eater!' With that, Andrew Blair sneered, and said--'Ay, 'tis the scapegoat he is!' Then, after a while, he went on, 'The Sin-Eater they call him; ay, just so; and a bitter good bargain it is, too, if all's true that's thought true!' And with that he laughed, and then his wife that was behind him laughed, and then...."

"Well, what then?"

"Well, 'tis Himself that hears and knows if it is true! But this is the thing I was told: After that laughing there was a stillness and a dread. For all there saw that the corpse had turned its head and was looking after you as you went down the heather. Then, Neil Ross, if that be your true name, Adam Blair that was dead put up his white face against the sky, and laughed."

At this, Ross sprang to his feet with a gasping sob.

"It is a lie, that thing!" he cried, shaking his fist at the shepherd.
"It is a lie."

"It is no lie. And by the same token, Andrew Blair shrank back white and shaking, and his woman had the swoon upon her, and who knows but the corpse might have come to life again had it not been for Maisie Macdonald, the deid-watcher, who clapped a handful of salt on his eyes, and tilted the coffin so that the bottom of it slid forward, and so let the whole fall flat on the ground, with Adam Blair in it sideways, and as likely as not cursing and groaning, as his wont was, for the hurt both to his old bones and his old ancient dignity."

Ross glared at the man as though the madness was upon him. Fear and horror and fierce rage swung him now this way and now that.

"What will the name of you be, shepherd?" he stuttered huskily.

"It is Eachainn Gilleasbuig I am to ourselves; and the English of that for those who have no Gaelic is Hector Gillespie; and I am Eachainn mac Ian mac Alasdair of Strathsheean that is where Sutherland lies against Ross."

"Then take this thing--and that is, the curse of the Sin-Eater! And a bitter bad thing may it be upon you and yours."

And with that Neil the Sin-Eater flung his hand up into the air, and then leaped past the shepherd, and a minute later was running through the frightened sheep, with his head low, and a white foam on his lips, and his eyes red with blood as a seal's that has the death-wound on it.

* * * * *

On the third day of the seventh month from that day, Aulay Macneill, coming into Balliemore of Iona from the west side of the island, said to old Ronald MacCormick, that was the father of his wife, that he had seen Neil Ross again, and that he was "absent"--for though he had spoken to him, Neil would not answer, but only gloomed at him from the wet weedy rock where he sat.

The going back of the man had loosed every tongue that was in Iona. When, too, it was known that he was wrought in some terrible way, if not actually mad, the islanders whispered that it was because of the sins of Adam Blair. Seldom or never now did they speak of him by his name, but simply as "The Sin-Eater." The thing was not so rare as to cause this strangeness, nor did many (and perhaps none did) think that the sins of the dead ever might or could abide with the living who had merely done a good Christian charitable thing. But there was a reason.

Not long after Neil Ross had come again to Iona, and had settled down in the ruined roofless house on the croft of Ballyrona, just like a fox or a wild-cat, as the saying was, he was given fishing-work to do by Aulay Macneill, who lived at Ard-an-teine, at the rocky north end of the machar or plain that is on the west Atlantic coast of the island.

One moonlit night, either the seventh or the ninth after the earthing of Adam Blair at his own place in the Ross, Aulay Macneill saw Neil Ross steal out of the shadow of Ballyrona and make for the sea. Macneill was there by the rocks, mending a lobster-creel. He had gone there because of the sadness. Well, when he saw the Sin-Eater, he watched.

Neil crept from rock to rock till he reached the last fang that churns the sea into yeast when the tide sucks the land just opposite.

Then he called out something that Aulay Macneill could not catch. With that he springs up, and throws his arms above him.

"Then," says Aulay when he tells the tale, "it was like a ghost he was. The moonshine was on his face like the curl o' a wave. White! there is no whiteness like that of the human face. It was whiter than the foam about the skerry it was; whiter than the moon shining; whiter than ... well, as white as the painted letters on the black boards of the fishing-cobles. There he stood, for all that the sea was about him, the slip-slop waves leapin' wild, and the tide making, too, at that. He was shaking like a sail two points off the wind. It was then that, all of a sudden, he called in a womany, screamin' voice--

"I am throwing the sins of Adam Blair into the midst of ye, white dogs o' the sea! Drown them, tear them, drag them away out into the black deeps! Ay, ay, ay, ye dancin' wild waves, this is the third time I am doing it, and now there is none left; no, not a sin, not a sin!

"O-hi O-ri, dark tide o' the sea,
I am giving the sins of a dead man to thee!
By the Stones, by the Wind, by the Fire, by the Tree,
From the dead man's sins set me free, set me free!
Adam mhic Anndra mhic Adam and me,
Set us free! Set us free!"

"Ay, sure, the Sin-Eater sang that over and over; and after the third singing he swung his arms and screamed:

"And listen to me, black waters an' running tide,
That rune is the good rune told me by Maisie the wise,
And I am Neil the son of Silis Macallum
By the black-hearted evil man Murtagh Ross,
That was the friend of Adam mac Anndra, God against him!"

"And with that he scrambled and fell into the sea. But, as I am Aulay mac Luais and no other, he was up in a moment, an' swimmin' like a seal, and then over the rocks again, an' away back to that lonely roofless place once more, laughing wild at times, an' muttering an' whispering."

It was this tale of Aulay Macneill's that stood between Neil Ross and the isle-folk. There was something behind all that, they whispered one to another.

So it was always the Sin-Eater he was called at last. None sought him. The few children who came upon him now and again fled at his approach, or at the very sight of him. Only Aulay Macneill saw him at times, and

had word of him.

After a month had gone by, all knew that the Sin-Eater was wrought to madness because of this awful thing: the burden of Adam Blair's sins would not go from him! Night and day he could hear them laughing low, it was said.

But it was the quiet madness. He went to and fro like a shadow in the grass, and almost as soundless as that, and as voiceless. More and more the name of him grew as a terror. There were few folk on that wild west coast of Iona, and these few avoided him when the word ran that he had knowledge of strange things, and converse, too, with the secrets of the sea.

One day Aulay Macneill, in his boat, but dumb with amaze and terror for him, saw him at high tide swimming on a long rolling wave right into the hollow of the Spouting Cave. In the memory of man, no one had done this and escaped one of three things: a snatching away into oblivion, a strangled death, or madness. The islanders know that there swims into the cave, at full tide, a Mar-Tarbh, a dreadful creature of the sea that some call a kelpie; only it is not a kelpie, which is like a woman, but rather is a sea-bull, offspring of the cattle that are never seen. Ill indeed for any sheep or goat, ay, or even dog or child, if any happens to be leaning over the edge of the Spouting Cave when the Mar-tarv roars; for, of a surety, it will fall in and straightway be devoured.

With awe and trembling Aulay listened for the screaming of the doomed man. It was full tide, and the sea-beast would be there.

The minutes passed, and no sign. Only the hollow booming of the sea, as it moved like a baffled blind giant round the cavern-bases; only the rush and spray of the water flung up the narrow shaft high into the windy air above the cliff it penetrates.

At last he saw what looked like a mass of seaweed swirled out on the surge. It was the Sin-Eater. With a leap, Aulay was at his oars. The boat swung through the sea. Just before Neil Ross was about to sink for the second time, he caught him and dragged him into the boat.

But then, as ever after, nothing was to be got out of the Sin-Eater save a single saying: Tha e lamhan fuar! Tha e lamhan fuar!--"It has a cold, cold hand!"

The telling of this and other tales left none free upon the island to look upon the "scapegoat" save as one accursed.

It was in the third month that a new phase of his madness came upon Neil Ross.

The horror of the sea and the passion for the sea came over him at the same happening. Oftentimes he would race along the shore, screaming wild names to it, now hot with hate and loathing, now as the pleading of a man with the woman of his love. And strange chants to it, too, were upon his lips. Old, old lines of forgotten runes were overheard by Aulay Macneill, and not Aulay only; lines wherein the ancient sea-name of the island, _Ioua_, that was given to it long before it was called Iona, or any other of the nine names that are said to belong to it, occurred again and again.

The flowing tide it was that wrought him thus. At the ebb he would wander across the weedy slabs or among the rocks, silent, and more like a lost duinshee than a man.

Then again after three months a change in his madness came. None knew what it was, though Aulay said that the man moaned and moaned because of the awful burden he bore. No drowning seas for the sins that could not be washed away, no grave for the live sins that would be quick till the day of the Judgment!

For weeks thereafter he disappeared. As to where he was, it is not for the knowing.

Then at last came that third day of the seventh month when, as I have said, Aulay Macneill told old Ronald MacCormick that he had seen the Sin-Eater again.

It was only a half-truth that he told, though. For, after he had seen Neil Ross upon the rock, he had followed him when he rose, and wandered back to the roofless place which he haunted now as of yore. Less wretched a shelter now it was, because of the summer that was come, though a cold, wet summer at that.

"Is that you, Neil Ross?" he had asked, as he peered into the shadows among the ruins of the house.

"That's not my name," said the Sin-Eater; and he seemed as strange then and there, as though he were a castaway from a foreign ship.

"And what will it be, then, you that are my friend, and sure knowing me as Aulay mac Luais--Aulay Macneill that never grudges you bit or sup?"

"_ I am Judas. _"

* * * * *

"And at that word," says Aulay Macneill, when he tells the tale, "at that word the pulse in my heart was like a bat in a shut room. But after a bit I took up the talk.

"'Indeed,' I said; 'and I was not for knowing that. May I be so bold as to ask whose son, and of what place?'

"But all he said to me was, 'I am Judas_.'

"Well, I said, to comfort him, 'Sure, it's not such a bad name in itself, though I am knowing some which have a more home-like sound.' But no, it was no good.

"'I am Judas. And because I sold the Son of God for five pieces of silver....'

"But here I interrupted him and said, 'Sure, now, Neil--I mean, Judas--it was eight times five.' Yet the simpleness of his sorrow prevailed, and I listened with the wet in my eyes.

"'I am Judas. And because I sold the Son of God for five silver shillings, He laid upon me all the nameless black sins of the world. And that is why I am bearing them till the Day of Days.'"

* * * * *

And this was the end of the Sin-Eater; for I will not tell the long story of Aulay Macneill, that gets longer and longer every winter; but only the unchanging close of it.

I will tell it in the words of Aulay.

* * * * *

"A bitter, wild day it was, that day I saw him to see him no more. It was late. The sea was red with the flamin' light that burned up the air betwixt Iona and all that is west of West. I was on the shore, looking at the sea. The big green waves came in like the chariots in the Holy Book. Well, it was on the black shoulder of one of them, just short of the ton o' foam that swept above it, that I saw a spar surgin' by.

"'What is that?' I said to myself. And the reason of my wondering was this: I saw that a smaller spar was swung across it. And while I was watching that thing another great billow came in with a roar, and hurled the double spar back, and not so far from me but I might have gripped it. But who would have gripped that thing if he were for seeing what I saw?

"It is Himself knows that what I say is a true thing.

"On that spar was Neil Ross, the Sin-Eater. Naked he was as the day he was born. And he was lashed, too--ay, sure, he was lashed to it by ropes

round and round his legs and his waist and his left arm. It was the Cross he was on. I saw that thing with the fear upon me. Ah, poor drifting wreck that he was! _Judas on the Cross!_ It was his _eric_!

"But even as I watched, shaking in my limbs, I saw that there was life in him still. The lips were moving, and his right arm was ever for swinging this way and that. 'Twas like an oar, working him off a lee shore; ay, that was what I thought.

"Then, all at once, he caught sight of me. Well he knew me, poor man, that has his share of heaven now, I am thinking!

"He waved, and called, but the hearing could not be, because of a big surge o' water that came tumbling down upon him. In the stroke of an oar he was swept close by the rocks where I was standing. In that flounderin', seethin' whirlpool I saw the white face of him for a moment, an' as he went out on the re-surge like a hauled net, I heard these words fallin' against my ears:

"An eirig m'anama.... In ransom for my soul!"

"And with that I saw the double-spar turn over and slide down the back-sweep of a drowning big wave. Ay, sure, it went out to the deep sea swift enough then. It was in the big eddy that rushes between Skerry-Mòr and Skerry-Beag. I did not see it again--no, not for the quarter of an hour, I am thinking. Then I saw just the whirling top of it rising out of the flying yeast of a great, black-blustering wave, that was rushing northward before the current that is called the Black-Eddy.

"With that you have the end of Neil Ross; ay, sure, him that was called the Sin-Eater. And that is a true thing; and may God save us the sorrow of sorrows.

"And that is all."

ELY'S AUTOMATIC HOUSEMAID.[A]

By Elizabeth W. Bellamy.

In order for a man to have faith in such an invention, he would have to know Harrison Ely. For Harrison Ely was a genius. I had known him in college, a man amazingly dull in Latin and Greek and even in English, but with ideas of his own that could not be expressed in language. His bent was purely mechanical, and found expression in innumerable ingenious contrivances to facilitate the study to which he had no inclination. His self-acting lexicon-holder was a matter of admiring wonder to his classmates, but it did not serve to increase the tenacity of his mental grasp upon the contents of the volume, and so

did little to recommend him to the faculty. And his self-feeding safety student-lamp admirably illuminated everything for him save the true and only path to an honorable degree.

It had been years since I had seen him or thought of him, but the memory is tenacious of small things, and the big yellow envelope which I found one morning awaiting me upon my breakfast-table brought his eccentric personality back to me with a rush. It was addressed to me in the Archimedean script always so characteristic of him, combining, as it seemed to do, the principles of the screw and of the inclined plane, and in its superscription Harrison Ely stood unmistakably revealed.

It was the first morning of a new cook, the latest potentate of a dynasty of ten who had briefly ruled in turn over our kitchen and ourselves during the preceding three months, and successively abdicated in favor of one another under the compelling influences of popular clamor, and in the face of such a political crisis my classmate's letter failed to receive immediate attention. Unfortunately but not unexpectedly the latest occupant of our culinary throne began her reign with no conspicuous reforms, and we received in gloomy silence her preliminary enactments in the way of greasy omelette and turbid and flavorless coffee, the yellow screed of Harrison Ely looking on the while with bilious sympathy as it leaned unopened against the water-bottle beside me.

As I drained the last medicinal drop of coffee my eye fell upon it, and needing a vicarious outlet for my feelings toward the cook, I seized it and tore it viciously open. It contained a letter from my classmate and half a dozen printed circulars. I spread open the former, and my eye fastened at once upon this sympathetic exordium:

"Doubtless, my dear friend, you have known what discomfort it is to be at the mercy of incompetent domestics--"

But my attention was distracted at this point by one of the circulars, which displayed an array of startling, cheering, alluring words, followed by plentiful exclamation points, that, like a bunch of keys, opened to my enraptured vision the gates of a terrestrial Paradise, where Bridgets should be no more, and where ill-cooked meals should become a mechanical impossibility. The boon we had been sighing for now presented itself for my acceptance, an accomplished fact. Harrison Ely had invented "An Automatic Household Beneficent Genius.--A Practical Realization of the Fabled Familiar of the Middle Ages." So the circular set forth.

Returning to the letter, I read that Harrison Ely, having exhausted his means in working out his invention, was unable to manufacture his "machine" in quantity as yet; but that he had just two on hand which he would sell in order to raise some ready money. He hoped that I would

buy one of his automatons, and aid him to sell the other.

Never did a request come at a more propitious moment. I had always entertained a kindness for Harrison Ely, and now such was my disgust at the incompetence of Bridget and Juliana and their predecessors that I was eager to stake the price of a “Household Beneficent Genius” on the success of my friend’s invention.

So, having grasped the purport of the circulars and letter, I broke forth to my wife:

“My dear, you’ve heard me speak of Harrison Ely--”

“That man who is always so near doing something great, and never _has_ done anything?” said she.

“He has done it at last!” I declared. “Harrison Ely is one of the greatest geniuses the world has ever seen. He has invented an ‘Automatic-Electric Machine-Servant.’”

My wife said, “Oh!”

There was not an atom of enthusiasm in that “Oh!” but I was not to be daunted.

“I am ready,” I resumed, “to invest my bottom dollar in _two_ of Harrison Ely’s machine-servants.”

Her eyes were fixed upon me as if they would read my very soul. “What do they cost?” she mildly asked.

“In comparison with the benefits to be derived, little enough. Listen!” I seized a circular at random, and began to read:

“The Automatic Household Genius, a veritable Domestic Fairy, swift, silent, sure; a Permanent, Inalienable, First-class Servant, warranted to give Satisfaction.”

“Ah!” said my wife; and the enthusiasm that was lacking in the “Oh!” made itself eloquent in that “Ah!” “What is the price?” she asked again.

“The price is all right, and we are going to try the experiment.”

“Are we though?” said she, between doubt and desire.

“Most assuredly; it will be a saving in the end. I shall write to Harrison Ely this very night.”

The return mail brought me a reply stating that two Electric-Automatic

Household Beneficent Geniuses had been shipped me by express. The letter enclosed a pamphlet that gave a more particular account of the E. A. H. B. G. than the circulars contained. My friend's invention was shaped in the likeness of the human figure, with body, head, arms, legs, hands and feet. It was clad in waterproof cloth, with a hood of the same to protect the head, and was shod with felt. The trunk contained the wheels and springs, and in the head was fixed the electric battery. The face, of bisque, was described as possessing "a very natural and pleasing expression."

Just at dusk an oblong box arrived by express and was duly delivered in our hall, but at my wife's urgent entreaty I consented not to unpack the machines until next day.

"If we should not get the knack of managing them, they might give us trouble," said this wise wife of mine.

I agreed to this, and having sent away Bridget with a week's wages, to the satisfaction of all parties, we went to bed in high hopes.

Early next morning we were astir.

"My dear," I said, "do not give yourself the least concern about breakfast; I am determined that Harrison's invention shall have fair play."

"Very well," my wife assented; but she prudently administered bread and butter to her offspring.

I opened the oblong box, where lay the automatons side by side, their hands placidly folded upon their waterproof breasts, and their eyes looking placidly expectant from under their waterproof hoods.

I confess the sight gave me a shock. Anna Maria turned pale; the children hid their faces in her skirts.

"Once out of the box," I said to myself, "and the horror will be over."

The machines stood on their feet admirably, but the horror was not materially lessened by this change of position. However, I assumed a bold front, and said, jocosely:

"Now, which is Bridget, and which is Juliana--which the cook, and which the housemaid?"

This distinction was made clear by dial-plates and indicators, set conspicuously between the shoulders, an opening being cut in the waterproof for that purpose. The housemaid's dial-plate was stamped around the circumference with the words: Bed, Broom, Duster, Door-bell,

Dining-room Service, Parlor Service, etc. In like manner, the cook's dial-plate bore the words that pertained to her department. I gave myself first to "setting" the housemaid, as being the simpler of the two.

"Now, my dear," said I, confidently, "we shall see how this Juliana can make the beds."

I proceeded, according to the pamphlet's directions, to point the indicator to the word "Bed." Next, as there were three beds to be made, I pushed in three of the five little red points surrounding the word. Then I set the "clock" connected with the indicator, for a thirty minutes' job, thinking it might take about ten minutes to a bed. I did not consult my wife, for women do not understand machinery, and any suggestion of hesitancy on my part would have demoralized her.

The last thing to be done was to connect the indicator with the battery, a simple enough performance in itself, but the pamphlet of directions gave a repeated and red-lettered "CAUTION," never to interfere with the machine while it was at work! I therefore issued the command, "Non-combatants to the rear!" and was promptly obeyed.

What happened next I do not pretend to account for. By what subtle and mysterious action of electricity, by what unerring affinity, working through a marvellous mechanism, that Electric-Automatic Household Beneficent Genius, whom--or which, for short--we called Juliana, sought its appropriate task, is the inventor's secret. I don't undertake to explain, I merely narrate. With a "click" the connection was made, and the new Juliana went up-stairs at a brisk and business-like pace.

We followed in breathless amazement. In less than five minutes, bed number one was made, and in a twinkling the second was taken in hand, and number three also was fairly accomplished, long before the allotted thirty minutes had expired. By this time, familiarity had somewhat dulled that awe and wonder with which we had gaped upon the first performance, and I beheld a smile of hopeful satisfaction on my wife's anxious countenance.

Our youngest, a boy aged three, was quick to feel the genial influence of this smile, and encouraged thereby, he bounced into the middle of the first bed. Hardly had he alighted there, when our automaton, having finished making the third bed, returned to her first job, and, before we could imagine mischief, the mattresses were jerked about, and the child was tumbled, headforemost on the floor!

Had the flesh-and-blood Juliana been guilty of such an act, she should have been dismissed on the spot; but, as it was, no one of us ventured so much as a remonstrance. My wife lifted the screaming child, and the imperturbable machine went on to re-adjust the bed with mechanical

exactitude.

At this point a wild shout of mingled exultation, amazement and terror arose from below, and we hastened down-stairs to find our son John hugging his elbows and capering frantically in front of the kitchen-door, where the electric cook was stirring empty nothing in a pan, with a zeal worthy a dozen eggs.

My eldest hopeful, impelled by that spirit of enterprise and audacity characteristic of nine-year-old boys, had ventured to experiment with the kitchen automaton, and by sheer accident had effected a working connection between the battery and the indicator, and the machine, in “going off,” had given the boy a blow that made him feel, as he expressed it, “like a funny-bone all over.”

“And served you right!” cried I. The thing was set for an hour and a half of work, according to the showing of the dial-plate, and no chance to stop it before I must leave for my office. Had the materials been supplied, we might have had breakfast; but, remembering the red-lettered “CAUTION,” we dared not supply materials while that indefatigable spoon was gyrating in the empty pan. For my distraction, Kitty, my daughter of seven years, now called to me from up-stairs:

“Papa, you _better_ come, quick! _It’s_ a-tearin’ up these beds!”

“My dear,” I sighed, “there’s no way to stop it. We’ll have to wait for the works to run down. I must call Harrison’s attention to this defect. He ought to provide some sort of brake.”

We went up-stairs again. The B. G. Juliana stood beside the bed which she had just torn up for the sixth or seventh time, when suddenly she became, so to speak, paralyzed; her arms, in the act of spreading the sheets, dropped by her sides, her back stiffened, and she stood absolutely motionless, leaving her job unfinished--the B. G. would move no more until duly “set” again.

I now discovered that I was hungry. “If that Fiend in the kitchen were only at work about something substantial, instead of whipping the air into imaginary omelettes!” I groaned.

“Never mind,” said my wife; “I’ve a pot of coffee on the kerosene stove.”

Bless her! She was worth a thousand Beneficent Geniuses, and so I told her.

I did not return until late, but I was in good spirits, and I greeted my wife gayly:

“Well, how do they work?”

“_Like fiends!_” my usually placid helpmeet replied, so vehemently that I was alarmed. “They flagged at first,” she proceeded, excitedly, “and I oiled them, which _I_ am not going to do, ever again. According to the directions, I poured the oil down their throats. It was horrible! They seemed to me to _drink it greedily_.”

“Nonsense! That’s your imagination.”

“Very well,” said Anna Maria. “You can do the oiling in future. They took a good deal this morning; it wasn’t easy to stop pouring it down. And they worked-- _obstreperously_. That Fiend in the kitchen has cooked all the provisions I am going to supply _this_ day, but still she goes on, and it’s no use to say a word.”

“Don’t be absurd,” I remonstrated. “The thing is only a machine.”

“I’m not so sure about that!” she retorted. “As for the other one--I set it sweeping, and it is sweeping still!”

We ate the dinner prepared by the kitchen Fiend, and really, I was tempted to compliment the cook in a set speech, but recollected myself in time to spare Anna Maria the triumph of saying, “I told you so!”

Now, that John of mine, still in pursuit of knowledge, had spent the day studying Harrison Ely’s pamphlet, and he learned that the machines could be set, like an alarm-clock, for any given hour. Therefore, as soon as the Juliana had collapsed over a pile of dust in the middle of the hall, John, unknown to us, set her indicator to the broom-handle for seven o’clock the following morning. When the Fiend in the kitchen ran down, leaving everything in confusion, my much-tried wife persuaded me to give my exclusive attention to that machine, and the Juliana was put safely in a corner. Thus it happened that John’s interference escaped detection. I set Bridget’s indicator for kitchen-cleaning at seven-thirty the next morning.

“When we understand them better,” I said to my wife, “we will set their morning tasks for an earlier hour, but we won’t put it too early now, since we must first learn their ways.”

“That’s the trouble with all new servants,” said Anna Maria.

The next morning at seven-thirty, precisely, we were awakened by a commotion in the kitchen.

“By George Washington!” I exclaimed. “The Thing’s on time!”

I needed no urging to make me forsake my pillow, but Anna Maria was

ahead of me.

“Now, my dear, don’t get excited,” I exhorted, but in vain.

“Don’t you hear?” she whispered, in terror. “_The other one! _--swe--eep--ing!” And she darted from the room.

I paused to listen, and heard the patter of three pairs of little bare feet across the hall up-stairs. The children were following their mother. The next sound I heard was like the dragging of a rug along the floor. I recognized this peculiar sound as the footsteps of the B. G. Then came a dull thud, mingled with a shout from Johnnie, a scream from my wife, and the terrified cries of the two younger children. I rushed out just in time to see John, in his night-clothes, with his hair on end, tear down-stairs like a streak of lightning. My little Kitty and the three-year-old baby stood clasped in each other’s arms at the head of the stairs, sobbing in terror, and, half-way down, was my wife, leaning over the railing, with ashen face and rigid body, her fascinated gaze fixed upon a dark and struggling mass in the hall below.

John, when he reached the bottom of the stairs, began capering like a goat gone mad, digging the floor with his bare heels, clapping his hands with an awful glee, and shouting:

“Bet your bottom dollar on the one that whips!”

The Juliana and the Bridget were fighting for the broom!

I comprehended the situation intuitively. The kitchen-cleaning, for which the Fiend had been “set,” had reached a point that demanded the broom, and that subtle, attractive affinity, which my friend’s genius had known how to produce, but had not learned to regulate, impelled the unerring automaton towards the only broom in the house, which was now in the hands of its fellow-automaton, and a struggle was inevitable. What I could not understand--Johnnie having kept his own counsel--was this uncontrollable sweeping impulse that possessed the Juliana.

However, this was no time for investigating the exact cause of the terrific row now going on in our front hall. The Beneficent Geniuses had each a firm grip of the broom-handle, and they might have performed the sweeping very amicably together, could they but have agreed as to the field of labor, but their conflicting tendencies on this point brought about a rotary motion that sent them spinning around the hall, and kept them alternately cracking each other’s head with a violence that ought to have drawn blood. Considering their life-likeness, we should hardly have thought it strange if blood _had_ flowed, and it would have been a relief had the combatants but called each other names, so much did their dumbness intensify the horror of a struggle, in the midst of which the waterproof hoods fell off, revealing their

startlingly human countenances, not distorted by angry passions, but resolute, inexorable, calm, as though each was sustained in the contest by a lofty sense of duty.

“They’re alive! Kill ’em! Kill ’em, quick!” shrieked my wife, as the gyrating couple moved towards the stair-case.

“Let ’em alone,” said Johnnie--his sporting blood, which he inherits from his father, thoroughly roused--dancing about the automatic pugilists in delight, and alternately encouraging the one or the other to increased efforts.

Thus the fight went on with appalling energy and reckless courage on both sides, my wife wringing her hands upon the stair-case, our infants wailing in terror upon the landing above, and I wavering between an honest desire to see fair play and an apprehensive dread of consequences which was not unjustified.

In one of their frantic gyrations the figures struck the hat-rack and promptly converted it into a mass of splinters. In a minute more they became involved with a rubber plant--the pride of my wife’s heart--and distributed it impartially all over the premises. From this they caromed against the front door, wrecking both its stained-glass panes, and then down the length of the hall they sped again, fighting fiercely and dealing one another’s imperturbable countenances ringing blows with the disputed broom.

We became aware through Johnnie’s excited comments, that Juliana had lost an ear in the fray, and presently it was discernible that a fractured nose had somewhat modified the set geniality of expression that had distinguished Bridget’s face in its prime.

How this fierce and equal combat would have culminated if further prolonged no one but Harrison Ely can conjecture, but it came to an abrupt termination as the parlor clock chimed eight, the hour when the two automatons should have completed their appointed tasks.

Though quite late at my office that morning, I wired Ely before attending to business. Long-haired, gaunt and haggard, but cheerful as ever, he arrived next day, on fire with enthusiasm. He could hardly be persuaded to refresh himself with a cup of coffee before he took his two recalcitrant Geniuses in hand. It was curious to see him examine each machine, much as a physician would examine a patient. Finally his brow cleared, he gave a little puff of satisfaction, and exclaimed:

“Why, man alive, there’s nothing the matter--not a thing! What you consider a defect is really a merit--merely a surplus of mental energy. They’ve had too big a dose of oil. Few housekeepers have any idea about proper lubrication,” and he emitted another little snort, at which my

wife colored guiltily.

“I see just what’s wanted,” he resumed. “The will-power generated and not immediately expended becomes cumulative and gets beyond control. I’ll introduce a little compensator, to take up the excess and regulate the flow. Then a child can operate them.”

It was now Johnnie’s turn to blush.

“Ship ’em right back to the factory, and we’ll have ’em all right in a few days. I see where the mechanism can be greatly improved, and when you get ’em again I know you’ll never consent to part with ’em!”

* * * * *

That was four months ago. The “Domestic Fairies” have not yet been returned from Harrison’s laboratory, but I am confidently looking for the familiar oblong packing case, and expect any day to see in the papers the prospectus of the syndicate which Ely informs me is being “promoted” to manufacture his automatic housemaid.

[Illustration]

FOOTNOTE:

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TRANSCRIBER’S NOTES:

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DOUBLE TAKE

By Wilson Parks Griffith

*The Chicago Time Capsule was indeed an elaborate production.
The greatest of American acting, writing and electronics*

went into its story of Man, 1960, for future historians. And, centuries later, it was dutifully recovered. Only...._

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from
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When the Travelers from Outer Space dug into the pile of moldering rock, they found the metal capsule their senses had told them was there. Battered and corroded though it was, the shadow vibrations showed that it had once been smooth and shiny. As smooth, shiny and impervious to wear as Twentieth Century Earth technology could make it.

At the time the Mayor of Chicago had ceremoniously tossed a handful of lake sand into the hole, had his picture taken smiling against the skyline, and had moved away to let the workmen fill the hole with cement and place the marker, the Time Capsule had been bright with the hopes of civilization sending its proud present into the uncertain future.

Time passed....

The tiny radio transmitter in the capsule began throwing out its wide signal at the exact instant planned for it many centuries before. No one heard. Eventually, the tiny powerful batteries gave out. The signal died.

Time passed....

When the Travelers from Outer Space took the capsule back to their ship and opened it, they found the contents in perfect order. Even the reel of magnetic tape had not succumbed to the centuries.

In due course, the Travelers examined the tape, divined its purpose, and constructed a machine that would play back the recording.

* * * * *

Out of a million evolutionary possibilities in a Universe of planets, the chances of two intelligent races being even roughly similar are astronomically remote.

A being develops sense organs for no other reason than to make it aware of its environment. The simplest primitive being's awareness of its environment centers around food, its means of survival. It develops organs and appendages that will enable it to ferret out, obtain and ingest its food. As the food differs, so, then, does the eater.

The Travelers had no ears or eyes, as such. They had other organs for other purposes, but the net result was that they "saw" and "heard" quite as well--even better--than Earthmen.

Perhaps that explains why the Travelers gleaned so much more from the tape recording in the Twentieth Century capsule than its originators had planned or intended.

* * * * *

Not just any radio show could be placed in the Time Capsule. What picture of contemporary 1960 mankind would the men of the future derive from a soap opera? A news analysis? Or top comedy show? Certainly not a flattering one, and so, reasoned the brass in charge of the project, not a true one.

No, the only answer was to produce a special documentary program, painting on a broad canvas the glories that were the common man's birthright in an enlightened democracy. As July 4th was only a month away, the idea was a natural. The program would be carried simultaneously on four networks, then placed in the Time Capsule so that historians of the future would have something solid on which to base their conclusions.

A famous poet-radio writer was hired to write the script. Hollywood's greatest young male star donated his services (with much attendant publicity) as narrator. A self-acknowledged genius who directed radio shows for a living condescended to lend his talents to the production. Numerous other actors, musicians, technicians and assistants were hired ... none well-known, but all quite competent.

July 4th, the big day, arrived. The cast went into rehearsal early in the morning. By the second complete run-through, just before the break for lunch, the show was hanging together nicely. After four hours of polishing in the afternoon, it was ready to go on the air. Everyone's nerves were raw, but the show sounded great.

Naturally, when a room full of creative people have been rubbing against one another for a full day, a lot of emotions are generated. The listening audience never knew about it, but it took the actors, directors, musicians and technicians several days to get the session out of their systems. During rehearsals, the young Hollywood star developed a consuming lust for one of the minor actresses. One of the minor actors developed a consuming lust for the young Hollywood star. Everyone immediately hated the director, and he, lofty and all-wise, contemptuously hated them in return. By eight o'clock that night, show time, the splendid documentary on the splendid American people was not the only thing that was at peak pitch.

It was the only thing, however, that the radio audience heard. It was magnificent. Future students hearing the tape could not but conclude that here was the Golden Age. Man, at least American man, circa 1960, noble, humble and sincere, was carrying in his bosom the seeds of greatness. Difficulties still existed, of course, but they were not insurmountable. A few deluded people seemed to be working against the common good, but the program left no doubt that this would be cleaned up in short order. The millenium was at hand!

* * * * *

When the Travelers from Outer Space, who were a team of historians doing research on the history of life throughout the Universe, listened to the tape recording, their "ears" heard none of the program as it had been originally broadcast. They were no less fascinated, however, for what they heard was the thought patterns of the people who had been connected with the program. These thoughts, in the form of electrical impulses, were also recorded on the magnetic surface of the tape, and were the only sounds audible to the Travelers.

What a pity these future historians didn't get mankind's version of the life of mankind in 1960, after the producers had gone to so much trouble to tie it up in a package for them. Their conception of Earth culture was based on the thought impulses they "heard", and their History of Earth was written accordingly. The last paragraph is worth noting:

"In the main, it is quite fortunate for life in the Universe that these primitive people destroyed themselves before they learned how to leave their planet. Lustful, murderous and guilt-ridden, they are perhaps the worst examples of intelligent life that we have ever discovered. And yet, paradox supreme, they had one quality that we ourselves would do well to emulate. That quality we can only surmise, for nothing on the recording spoke of it, yet it is obvious, for if they hadn't had this quality, there would have been no recording left for us at all.

"_How strange that these tortured people should practise an unparalleled example of Life's highest achievement ... complete honesty with themselves and others._"

THE ERROR OF THE EMBROIDERED SLIPPER

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Eastern Shame Girl*, by Charles Georges Souli

The sun is in our eyes
And we think we are running out towards joy;
Our heart pulls us down

And we shall never know the way of the sky
Or the end of all things.

During the Hung-Chih period of our Dynasty there lived at Hang-chow a young man who was called Chang Loyalty. After his parents died, leaving him a great fortune, he no longer had anyone to guide him, and therefore, throwing away his books, he spent his time with gallants of the sort we name fou-lang-tzu, that is to say "floating-on-the-waves." They do not know how to profit by opportunity. So Chang no longer studied anything but various ball games, he abandoned himself to the pleasures of the theatre, and took his delight in those gardens where the breezes of love blow in the moonlight. In a word, he followed the changing flowers of illusion; and, as he was himself seductive, as impassioned as expert in pleasure, and rich and generous, he became the favorite of all the women of the town. One day, when spring had but just caused all the flowers to come out on the amiable banks of the Lake of the West, Chang invited a company of singing girls and idlers to spend the afternoon on the blue waters.

He put on a gauze bonnet with floating wings, after the fashion of the time. His great transparent silk robe was of purple and silver, over a second embroidered one of pure white. White gauze stockings and red slippers completed the elegance of his appearance.

He went out, walking unhurriedly, gently waving a fan decorated with paintings. Behind him walked his little slave, Clear-Lute, who carried over his shoulder a mantle in case the weather should freshen, and a long guitar with which to accompany the singing girls.

As they were approaching the gate of Ch'ien-t'ang, Chang looked up, for no particular reason. On the first story of a house a maiden held back her window curtain and looked at him. From her whole person emanated so troubling a charm that he stopped in his walk, and felt a tremor in his body. For a long time they remained gazing at each other, until she slowly broke into a smile, and he felt his soul fly from him.

At this moment the door of the house opened below, and a man came forth; so Chang hastened to resume his walk, and returned in a few moments. The curtain was drawn back over the window. He waited, but there was no sign. At length he drew away, turning his head, and walking as slowly as if he had already gone a hundred leagues on the mountains.

Yet eventually he passed the town gate and rejoined his friends on the boat, which was at once steered to the middle of the lake. The banks were smiling with peach blossom: the willow leaves were a mist of gold and green. Little boats, with brightly-dressed passengers, crossed and re-crossed like ants. In very truth:

Hills are heaped upon hills
And the pavilions on the pavilions.
The songs and dances are never ceasing
On the West Lake.
The warm breeze fans the drunkenness
Of the pleasure walkers.
Heaven is above,
But here we have Hang-chow and Su-chow Lakes.

But Chang carried the picture of that young girl in his soul, and had no heart for pleasure.

His companions offered him cups of wine, wondering at his melancholy; but he was far from them.

At twilight they returned, and Chang re-entered by the Ch'ien-t'ang gate, passing before the girl's house. The window was shut. He stopped, and forced a cough; but there was no sign. He went to the end of the street, and came back again, but all was silent. Therefore he had no choice but to go away.

He returned next morning, and stayed at a shop near by to learn what he could. He was told:

"They are people called P'an. Their only daughter is sixteen years of age, and is named Eternal Life. The father has some connection with a certain powerful family which affords him protection. He lives by swindling, and everyone fears him. He is a veritable skin-pinker and bravo."

This news made Chang a little thoughtful, but he walked on by the house nevertheless. The young girl was again at her window. They looked at each other; but there were people about, and he had to go away.

That evening, as soon as night fell, he went back. The moon was shining as brightly as the sun, and the street was empty. The youthful beauty leaned at her window, wrapped in thought and bathed in the white light. She smiled at him, and he drew from his sleeve his scarlet muslin handkerchief. He made the knot known as "union of hearts gives victory." Rolling it in a ball, he threw it, and she adroitly caught it in two hands. Then she stooped and took off one of her little embroidered slippers. She dropped it into Chang's waiting fingers. Enraptured with this gift, which was a pledge of love and faith, he carried it to his lips and said softly:

"Thank you; Thank you, with all my heart!"

In tones of maddening sweetness, she replied:

"Ten thousand happinesses!"

Just then a rough voice was heard within the house. She made another sign to him and closed the window. And he went home drunk through silent streets made silver by the moon. Once in his library, he examined the slipper. It was a golden lotus, so small and so light that a thousand thoughts troubled the lover. He said:

"I must find someone to arrange our meeting, or else die from an over-stressing of desire."

Early in the morning, he put some pieces of silver in his sleeve and hastened to a little wine booth, not far from the house of P'an. He knew that he would find an old woman there, whom he often met in pleasurable places. In fact, he saw her and called to her. She at once saluted him, saying:

"Aya! My uncle, what brings you?"

"I happened to be passing," he answered carelessly.

"But I should like you to walk a little way with me."

"In what can I serve you?" she hastened to ask.

Without speaking, he took her into a quiet little tavern. When they were seated, and the attendant had brought them fruit and dishes of food, he poured out a full cup of hot wine and offered it to her, saying:

"I have something to ask of you, ma-ma Lu. But I am afraid that you cannot accomplish it."

"Without boasting," she answered with a wide smile, "there are few enterprises, however difficult, in which I do not succeed. What is it you desire?"

"I want you to arrange a meeting for me with the daughter of P'an, who lives in the Street of the Ten Officials. Here are five ounces of silver to begin with. If you succeed, you shall have quite as much more."

"The small Eternal Life? The little witch! I thought her so demure! I should never have imagined she was a wild flower. But the matter is difficult. There are only the parents and the daughter in that house, and the father is dangerous. He keeps a damnably suspicious watch over his door. How could you get in? I dare not promise any success."

"You have just boasted that you always succeed. Here are two ounces more."

The old woman's eyes gleamed like fire at the sight of the snow-colored metal, and she said:

"I will take the risk. If all goes well, it will be your fortune. If not, I shall at least have done my best. But give me a proof, for otherwise she would not listen to me."

Not without regret, Chang took from his bosom the little slipper, and gave it to her, wrapped in his handkerchief. The old woman at once slipped it into her sleeve with the pieces of money. As she was leaving him, she said again:

"The affair is delicate. You must have patience and not hurry me. That would be dangerous."

"I only ask you to do your best. Come and tell me as soon as you have an answer."

Eternal Life was profoundly agitated. Since that moonlit night she had had no more taste for food, but had said:

"If I married him I would not have lived in vain. But I know neither his name nor where he lives. When I saw him beneath the moon, why had I not wings to fly to him? ... As it is, I had only this red handkerchief."

Yet she had to live and speak as usual. But as soon as she was alone she fell again into her musing.

Two days later, old Lu entered their house. The father had gone out. The visitor said to mother and daughter:

"I received certain artificial flowers yesterday, and have come to show them to you."

She took a bunch of a thousand shades out of her basket.

"Would you not say they were real?"

"When I was young," said the mother, "we only wore ordinary flowers, and did not dream of marvels like these."

"Yet these are only considered mediocre. But the price of the finest is so high."

"If we cannot buy them, we can at least admire them," the young girl answered dryly.

With gathering smiles, the old woman took from the basket a bunch which was indeed incomparable.

"And what is the price of that?" questioned the mother.

"How should I dare to fix a price? I leave it to you. But if you have a little tea, I would willingly drink of it."

"In the admiration caused by your flowers, we have forgotten our manners. Wait for one moment, while I fetch some boiling water."

As soon as the mother had left the room, the woman took a slight parcel from her sleeve.

"What have you there?" asked Eternal Life.

"Something important which you must not see."

"Oh, but I must see it then."

"I shall not give it to you," said the cunning old woman. "Aya! You have taken it from me by force!" she added, letting the parcel into the girl's hand.

Impatiently the child untied the handkerchief, and recognized her slipper. Her face flushed into scarlet, and she said with difficulty: "A single one of these objects is of no use, ma-ma. Why did you show it me?"

"I know a certain Lord who would give his life to have the pair. Will you not consent to help me?"

Trembling all over, Eternal Life said to her softly:

"Since you know all, tell me his name and where he lives."

"He is called Chang, and he owns a hundred myriads of ounces. He is very gentle; his love is as deep as the sea. He has lost his soul through thinking of you, and has bidden me arrange a means for his entry."

"How can it be done? My father is terrible. When I have blown out my lamp, he often comes to look into the rooms. What is your plan, ma-ma?"

The old woman thought for a minute, and then said:

"It is not very difficult. You must go to bed early and, as soon as your father has come up and gone down again, you must rise quietly and open the window. You must wait for a signal, and let down a long piece of cloth. He will climb up with the help of this rope, and, if he is careful to go away before the fifth watch, no one will surprise you."

"Admirable!" cried the delighted child. "When will he come?"

"It is too late to-day. But I will go to him to-morrow morning. Give me a pledge of re-assurance for him."

"Assuredly! Take the other slipper. He will give it back to me to-morrow."

The old woman hid it in her sleeve, for the mother came in by this time with the tea. Soon after, she took up her basket and went away, accompanied to the door by the two women.

She went straight to the house of Chang, but he was out. She offered her flowers to the women of the house, waiting for some part of the day in vain.

Next morning she went again to find the young man, but he had not returned. She went away thoughtful.

The truth is that Chang had remained three days in the house of a Flower-in-the-Mist. When he returned and heard of the old woman's two visits, he hastened to find her. She said to him:

"The pledge of love which you entrusted to me is in her hand. She bade me tell you that her father is dangerous, but that he is to be away for a long time shortly. She will inform us." On his return journey the young man passed by P'an's house. Eternal Life was at her window, and they smiled tenderly at one another.

* * * * *

Three months had passed. Chang was sitting one morning in his library, when his servants told him that four police officers had come with a summons. He asked himself fearfully whether he had been mixed up in any scandal at a pleasure house; but he had to obey. He questioned the officers.

"It is a matter of taxes and duties," they answered.

Reassured, he changed his clothes and went with them, followed by several of his servants. He was taken at once to the hall where the Court sat, and, standing before the red table, he saluted the

magistrate. The latter looked at him intently, and harshly asked:

"How did you enter into an intrigue with P'an's daughter? How did you kill her father and her mother?"

Chang was a libertine. That is to say he had neither strength nor energy. Hearing himself thus unexpectedly accused of a double crime, he shook from head to foot, as if a bolt had fallen on him from a calm sky. He stammered:

"Although I had the intention of establishing a connection with her, I have not yet succeeded in doing so. As yet I have not known her house."

The Governor thundered:

"She has just confessed that her relation with you has lasted several months. How dare you deny it?"

Just then Chang perceived that the young girl was kneeling close to him. Bewildered and not knowing what to do, he turned to Eternal Life and asked:

"How can you say that I have been intimate with you? With what object are you trying to encompass my ruin?"

She sobbed without answering. Meanwhile the Governor called upon the officers to apply the buskin of torture to the young man. And they swarmed about him like ants.

Unhappily for him, Chang Loyalty had been brought up in muslin and gauze, and had grown to manhood in a brocade. How could he endure such torture? Hardly had he felt the pressure of the buskin before he cried:

"I confess everything!"

The Governor had a brush and paper given to the accused, that he might himself write out his confession. The unhappy man wept, saying:

"What must I write? I know nothing of the matter!" Then he turned to the young girl and added: "Do you at least tell me what you have done, so that I may write my confession."

Eternal Life answered in irritation: "Did you not look at me with lecherous eyes under my window? Did you not throw your handkerchief? Did you not match the pair of my embroidered slippers?"

"All that is true. But about the rest?"

The Governor here interrupted:

"If one thing is true, the rest is also. What is the use of arguing it? Since he refuses to write, let him be given thirty strokes of the heavy bamboo, let him be cast into the cell for those who are condemned to death."

Happily for Chang, his gaolers knew that he was very rich. They but touched him with their blows, and led him to prison with as much care as they would a butterfly. Each of them cried:

"Uncle, how could you do such a thing?"

"O my elder brothers," he lamented, "if it is true that I desired this girl, yet have I never met her. Do you believe that I could be a murderer? I know nothing about the murder. Tell me of it."

So he learned that, this very morning, Eternal Life on waking up had been surprised by the silence of the house. From the ground-floor room where she had passed the night, she had gone up to the story where her parents slept, and had opened the door of their room. In front of the bed, under the half-drawn curtains, the floor was a tarn of blood.

She was so frightened that she tumbled down the stairs and fell upon the street door, sobbing and crying out. Neighbors heard her and ran up, and she said to them:

"Yesterday, my parents went up to their room. I do not know who has killed them both."

The bolder ones went up the stairs to see. They opened the bed-curtains, and there were the man and his wife, stiff and with their throats cut across. They looked to right and left. The window was shut, and nothing was disturbed.

"It is a serious matter," they muttered. "Let us not act hastily."

One of them went at once to warn the district chief of police, who came and examined the scene of the crime. He shut and sealed the house, and led Eternal Life to the Governor's Court. The girl knelt down and told all that she knew, and the Governor said:

"If the door and windows were closed, and nothing has been stolen, the matter is dubious. Had your father an enemy?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"That is strange!" murmured the Governor, and thought for a moment.

Suddenly he told the officers to take off the silken veil with which the young girl had half-covered her head. He could then see her exceptional beauty.

"How old are you? Are you not betrothed?"

"I am seventeen, and I am still free."

"And you sleep on the ground-floor, while your parents have their room above? That is very curious."

"Until quite recently your slave slept above. But fifteen days ago they made a change. I do not know why."

The judge again reflected. Then he struck the table violently, crying out:

"It is you who have killed your father and mother. Or, rather, it is your lover. Tell me his name."

"Your slave never leaves the house. How could she have a forbidden love? Would not the neighbors know it?"

The judge made a salacious grimace:

"In a case of murder the neighbors know nothing. It is clear that you have had relations with a man. Your parents knew of it, and that is why they changed their room. Your lover killed them in a rage."

Hearing these words, she became scarlet and then pale. At a sign from the Governor, the gaolers threw themselves like tigers upon the little girl, closing a cruel pair of iron nippers on her pellucid and delicate jade hand. As the jaws began to crush her fingers, she uttered loud cries:

"Mercy, my lord. I have a lover."

"What is his name?"

"Chang Loyalty."

And then she fainted. The Governor knew enough. He summoned the young man and, being convinced of his guilt, had him put in prison, while awaiting further information. It is well said in a certain proverb:

"Even while you are sitting in your house with the doors shut, misfortune falls from heaven."

In prison, Chang reflected upon this sudden accusation. Could he have

committed this double crime in his sleep? In the end he offered his gaolers ten ounces if they would take him to Eternal Life. When they bargained, he promised twenty ounces. Then they led him as far as the grill of the women's prison. The girl was there, weeping without stint. As soon as she saw him, she reviled him between her sobs:

"Ungrateful and dishonorable! You made me mad with love for you. Why should you cut my parents' throats, and cause my death?"

"Do not make unnecessary noise," he interrupted.

"Let us rather try to clear up this mystery. It is certain that I sent the old woman Lu to you with your little slipper. Did you see her?"

"Naturally, wretch," she answered disdainfully.

Again he interrupted:

"She told me that you had kept your pledge, that your father was terrible, and that you were awaiting his departure in order to arrange a meeting. But since then I have known nothing of you, save a few rare smiles."

"Forgetful murderer," she groaned, "again you deny it. Did you not confess all before the judge? Why do you come to torment me?"

"My unfortunate body could not endure the torture. By confessing I gained some days of life. Do not fly into a rage, but answer me: what happened after ma-ma Lu had visited you?"

"We arranged everything for the next night. You came and gave me back my slipper. Since then you have climbed up to my room each night. Dare you say it is not true?"

Chang thought deeply. The bystanders wondered whether he were guilty and seeking a clever explanation to save himself, or whether he were really innocent. At last he said: "Then if we have met often, you should be very certain of my voice and body. Look at me well, and think."

The gaolers exclaimed:

"What he says is just. If there were a mistake, would you leave him to die?"

Eternal Life was puzzled, and looked at him earnestly. He repeated:

"Is it I? Dear heart, speak quickly!"

"He who came," she said at last, "was perhaps bigger. But it was always dark, and how can I be sure? But I remember that on your left shoulder you have a scar as big as a copper piece."

The bystanders at once exclaimed:

"That is easy to verify. There can be no further mistake. Uncle, unclothe yourself quickly. If there is nothing there, we shall inform the Governor."

Chang immediately uncovered his shoulder, and the white flesh was as smooth as marble. Eternal Life could not believe her eyes. When the young man had gone back, filled full of hope, to his prison, the gaolers made their report to the Governor, who had already summoned ma-ma Lu.

In the audience chamber the old woman knelt down and was quite overcome. The judge began by ordering her forty strokes for having acted as an abettor of corruption. The flesh of her thighs was nothing but a bloody paste. She told the whole story.

After coming back from Chang's house without having seen him, old Lu had found her son Wu-han in their little food shop. He had said to her:

"You come at the right time. I must kill a pig this morning, and our assistant has gone out for the day."

The old woman did not like this work. But she was very much afraid of her son, and did not dare to refuse.

"Wait till I have changed my clothes!" was all she said.

While she was taking off her outer garment, a parcel fell from the sleeve of it. Thinking that it was money, Wu-han quickly picked it up and opened it. It was the pair of embroidered slippers. He said:

"Oh! Oh! Who is the little girl who has such feet? She must be of a very loving nature. If I could hold her to my heart for a whole night, I should not have lived in vain. But how do these slippers come here, for they have already been worn?"

"Give them back to me!" she cried. "There is much money in them, which I will hand to you." And she told him the whole matter. But he objected:

"It has been a common saying from the earliest times that acts not committed can alone remain unknown. This P'an is a bravo. If he learns of the matter, all the silver which you receive will be too little to

buy his silence. Our whole shop would fall into his hands."

In dismay the old woman replied:

"Your words are full of reason. I am going to give back the silver and the slippers. I am going to let it be understood that I refuse to embroil myself with curtain affairs."

"Where is the silver?" he asked.

The old woman took it from her sleeve, and he put it into his, saying:

"Leave all to me. If they should happen to come and seek a quarrel with us, we shall have proofs against them. And, if nothing comes of it, no one will dare to reclaim the money."

"But what shall I say if he asks me for news?"

"That you have not had time enough. Or even that the matter cannot be arranged."

What could she do, she who was thus deprived of the money and the pledge of love? She was surely obliged to lie.

As for Wu-han, he at once went out and spent the money on rich clothes and a fine gauze bonnet.

In the evening, when his mother was asleep, he put on his pretty clothes and set the slippers in his sleeve. As the great clock sounded the first watch, he went out softly and made straight for the house of P'an. Light clouds were hiding the moon. It was only half full.

He coughed before the house. The window opened, and Eternal Life appeared. She tied a piece of silk to the frame, and let the other end fall. He caught it and climbed up, making use of the projections of the wall with his two feet. Then, with a thousand precautions, he stepped over the sill. Trembling, the girl hastened to draw back the piece of silk and to shut the window.

Then he took the child in his arms, and passion leaped up in their two hearts. In the darkness, and in such emotion, how could that mistake be known? The usurper drew her towards him.

Even so is the precious scented flower of the nutmeg embraced by the bind-weed. Even so is the plum blossom torn by the hail. Even so is the sparrow's nest most outraged by the cuckoo.

When the first clouds of their desire were dissipated by the rain of caresses, Wu-han took from his sleeve the pledges of love. She gave

them back to him:

"Now that I am happy, I no more wish to go out."

About the fourth watch, before daylight, Wu-han arose and climbed stealthily down to the street.

Since that time there had to be a storm of rain, or the moon had to be very clear, to prevent Wu-han from hurrying to the small woman. The days, and then the months, passed in this way.

One night the deceiver accidentally made some noise as he went away. P'an immediately came up to them, but saw nothing; for Eternal Life succeeded in not betraying herself. Next night she warned her lover, saying to him in her sense:

"Do not come for a few days. That will be safer. Let us give them time to forget about it."

But her father had his ears on the alert; he heard the window creak, and he ran up, though again too late. In the morning he said to his wife:

"This baby is certainly about some villainy. She keeps her mouth as tight as a trap."

"I also have a suspicion," replied her mother.

"Yet the room opens on to the stairs, which come down into our room."

"I am going to give her a good taste of the rod to make her speak."

"That is a bad plan, a very bad plan," said her mother. "It is a true proverb that you must not show family blemishes. If you beat her, all the neighbors will know, and who would wish to marry her? Let us rather make her sleep in our room, which has no way out except the door. We will spend the night up the stairs, and see what happens."

On being told of this proposal, Eternal Life dared not say anything. And on the higher floor husband and wife slept in peace.

One evening Wu-ban felt his heart seething with passion. Fearing that he might be attacked by P'an, he armed himself with a knife, which he used to cut pigs' throats. Under Eternal Life's window, he coughed softly. Nothing stirred. He coughed more loudly, thinking she was asleep. But everything remained quiet. He was going back to his house, in a thoughtful mood, when he saw a ladder left near to a house which was being built. He seized upon it, carried it away, and put it up against Eternal Life's window. The catch was not locked. He pushed it

open, climbed over the sill, and silently went toward the bed.

Drunken with joy, Wu-ban was already disrobing himself of his clothes, when, in the stillness of the night, his ears caught the sound of two people breathing, instead of one. He listened with controlled breath. Unmistakably the rough breathing of a man was mingled with the softer murmur of a woman.

He was suddenly blinded with violent anger:

"This is why she did not answer my signal. The vile child has another man within. It was to get rid of me that she told me of her father's suspicion!"

In his jealous madness he drew his knife and gently felt for the man's throat. With a clean blow he drove the weapon into the flesh, and before the woman could move, he cut her throat also, almost beheading her.

He wiped the knife and his hands on the blanket, opened the window, and descended. He had closed the catches. Once outside, he ran to replace the ladder, and went back to his house. Denounced by his mother and brought before the Court, Wu-ban tried to deny the accusation. But the officers, on uncovering his shoulder, brought a scar to view. Eternal Life recognized his voice and his body. The first tortures overcame his obstinacy, and he confessed all.

The murderer was condemned to slow death.

Eternal Life was strangled, as was old Lu.

Chang, whose lecherous intentions had been the cause of all, was sentenced to a heavy fine. In dismay, and half ruined, he no more left his study chamber. Not long afterwards, he was carried off by a lassitude and a languor.

_Lu Wu-han yin liu ho chin hsieh (Lu Wi-han keeps
an Embroidered Slipper to his scathe) Hsing
Shih heng yen (1627), 16th Tale._

THE OTHER WING

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Day and Night Stories*, by Algernon Blackwood

It used to puzzle him that, after dark, some one _would_ look in round the edge of the bedroom door, and withdraw again too rapidly for him

to see the face. When the nurse had gone away with the candle this happened: "Good night, Master Tim," she said usually, shading the light with one hand to protect his eyes; "dream of me and I'll dream of you." She went out slowly. The sharp-edged shadow of the door ran across the ceiling like a train. There came a whispered colloquy in the corridor outside, about himself, of course, and--he was alone. He heard her steps going deeper and deeper into the bosom of the old country house; they were audible for a moment on the stone flooring of the hall; and sometimes the dull thump of the baize door into the servants' quarters just reached him, too--then silence. But it was only when the last sound, as well as the last sign of her had vanished, that the face emerged from its hiding-place and flashed in upon him round the corner. As a rule, too, it came just as he was saying, "Now I'll go to sleep. I won't think any longer. Good night, Master Tim, and happy dreams." He loved to say this to himself; it brought a sense of companionship, as though there were two persons speaking.

The room was on the top of the old house, a big, high-ceilinged room, and his bed against the wall had an iron railing round it; he felt very safe and protected in it. The curtains at the other end of the room were drawn. He lay watching the firelight dancing on the heavy folds, and their pattern, showing a spaniel chasing a long-tailed bird towards a bushy tree, interested and amused him. It was repeated over and over again. He counted the number of dogs, and the number of birds, and the number of trees, but could never make them agree. There was a plan somewhere in that pattern; if only he could discover it, the dogs and birds and trees would "come out right." Hundreds and hundreds of times he had played this game, for the plan in the pattern made it possible to take sides, and the bird and dog were against him. They always won, however; Tim usually fell asleep just when the advantage was on his own side. The curtains hung steadily enough most of the time, but it seemed to him once or twice that they stirred--hiding a dog or bird on purpose to prevent his winning. For instance, he had eleven birds and eleven trees, and, fixing them in his mind by saying, "that's eleven birds and eleven trees, but only ten dogs," his eyes darted back to find the eleventh dog, when--the curtain moved and threw all his calculations into confusion again. The eleventh dog was hidden. He did not quite like the movement; it gave him questionable feelings, rather, for the curtain did not move of itself. Yet, usually, he was too intent upon counting the dogs to feel positive alarm.

Opposite to him was the fireplace, full of red and yellow coals; and, lying with his head sideways on the pillow, he could see directly in between the bars. When the coals settled with a soft and powdery crash, he turned his eyes from the curtains to the grate, trying to discover exactly which bits had fallen. So long as the glow was there the sound seemed pleasant enough, but sometimes he awoke later in the night, the room huge with darkness, the fire almost out--and the sound was not so pleasant then. It startled him. The coals did not fall of themselves.

It seemed that some one poked them cautiously. The shadows were very thick before the bars. As with the curtains, moreover, the morning aspect of the extinguished fire, the ice-cold cinders that made a clinking sound like tin, caused no emotion whatever in his soul.

And it was usually while he lay waiting for sleep, tired both of the curtain and the coal games, on the point, indeed, of saying, "I'll go to sleep now," that the puzzling thing took place. He would be staring drowsily at the dying fire, perhaps counting the stockings and flannel garments that hung along the high fender-rail when, suddenly, a person looked in with lightning swiftness through the door and vanished again before he could possibly turn his head to see. The appearance and disappearance were accomplished with amazing rapidity always.

It was a head and shoulders that looked in, and the movement combined the speed, the lightness and the silence of a shadow. Only it was not a shadow. A hand held the edge of the door. The face shot round, saw him, and withdrew like lightning. It was utterly beyond him to imagine anything more quick and clever. It darted. He heard no sound. It went. But--it had seen him, looked him all over, examined him, noted what he was doing with that lightning glance. It wanted to know if he were awake still, or asleep. And though it went off, it still watched him from a distance; it waited somewhere; it knew all about him. _Where_ it waited no one could ever guess. It came probably, he felt, from beyond the house, possibly from the roof, but most likely from the garden or the sky. Yet, though strange, it was not terrible. It was a kindly and protective figure, he felt. And when it happened he never called for help, because the occurrence simply took his voice away.

"It comes from the Nightmare Passage," he decided; "but it's _not_ a nightmare." It puzzled him.

Sometimes, moreover, it came more than once in a single night. He was pretty sure--not _quite_ positive--that it occupied his room as soon as he was properly asleep. It took possession, sitting perhaps before the dying fire, standing upright behind the heavy curtains, or even lying down in the empty bed his brother used when he was home from school. Perhaps it played the curtain game, perhaps it poked the coals; it knew, at any rate, where the eleventh dog had lain concealed. It certainly came in and out; certainly, too, it did not wish to be seen. For, more than once, on waking suddenly in the midnight blackness, Tim knew it was standing close beside his bed and bending over him. He felt, rather than heard, its presence. It glided quietly away. It moved with marvellous softness, yet he was positive it moved. He felt the difference, so to speak. It had been near him, now it was gone. It came back, too--just as he was falling into sleep again. Its midnight coming and going, however, stood out sharply different from its first shy, tentative approach. For in the firelight it came alone; whereas in the black and silent hours, it had with it--others.

And it was then he made up his mind that its swift and quiet movements were due to the fact that it had wings. It flew. And the others that came with it in the darkness were "its little ones." He also made up his mind that all were friendly, comforting, protective, and that while positively not a Nightmare, it yet came somehow along the Nightmare Passage before it reached him. "You see, it's like this," he explained to the nurse: "The big one comes to visit me alone, but it only brings its little ones when I'm quite asleep."

"Then the quicker you get to sleep the better, isn't it, Master Tim?"

He replied: "Rather! I always do. Only I wonder where they come from!" He spoke, however, as though he had an inkling.

But the nurse was so dull about it that he gave her up and tried his father. "Of course," replied this busy but affectionate parent; "it's either nobody at all, or else it's Sleep coming to carry you away to the land of dreams." He made the statement kindly but somewhat briskly, for he was worried just then about the extra taxes on his land, and the effort to fix his mind on Tim's fanciful world was beyond him at the moment. He lifted the boy on to his knee, kissed and patted him as though he were a favourite dog, and planted him on the rug again with a flying sweep. "Run and ask your mother," he added; "she knows all that kind of thing. Then come back and tell me all about it--another time."

Tim found his mother in an arm-chair before the fire of another room; she was knitting and reading at the same time--a wonderful thing the boy could never understand. She raised her head as he came in, pushed her glasses on to her forehead, and held her arms out. He told her everything, ending up with what his father said.

"You see, it's not Jackman, or Thompson, or any one like that," he exclaimed. "It's some one real."

"But nice," she assured him, "some one who comes to take care of you and see that you're all safe and cosy."

"Oh, yes, I know that. But----"

"I think your father's right," she added quickly. "It's Sleep, I'm sure, who pops in round the door like that. Sleep has got wings, I've always heard."

"Then the other thing--the little ones?" he asked. "Are they just sorts of dozes, you think?"

Mother did not answer for a moment. She turned down the page of her book, closed it slowly, put it on the table beside her. More slowly

still she put her knitting away, arranging the wool and needles with some deliberation.

"Perhaps," she said, drawing the boy closer to her and looking into his big eyes of wonder, "they're dreams!"

Tim felt a thrill run through him as she said it. He stepped back a foot or so and clapped his hands softly. "Dreams!" he whispered with enthusiasm and belief; "of course! I never thought of that."

His mother, having proved her sagacity, then made a mistake. She noted her success, but instead of leaving it there, she elaborated and explained. As Tim expressed it she "went on about it." Therefore he did not listen. He followed his train of thought alone. And presently, he interrupted her long sentences with a conclusion of his own:

"Then I know where She hides," he announced with a touch of awe. "Where She lives, I mean." And without waiting to be asked, he imparted the information: "It's in the Other Wing."

"Ah!" said his mother, taken by surprise. "How clever of you, Tim!"--and thus confirmed it.

Thenceforward this was established in his life--that Sleep and her attendant Dreams hid during the daytime in that unused portion of the great Elizabethan mansion called the Other Wing. This other wing was unoccupied, its corridors untrodden, its windows shuttered and its rooms all closed. At various places green baize doors led into it, but no one ever opened them. For many years this part had been shut up; and for the children, properly speaking, it was out of bounds. They never mentioned it as a possible place, at any rate; in hide-and-seek it was not considered, even; there was a hint of the inaccessible about the Other Wing. Shadows, dust, and silence had it to themselves.

But Tim, having ideas of his own about everything, possessed special information about the Other Wing. He believed it was inhabited. Who occupied the immense series of empty rooms, who trod the spacious corridors, who passed to and fro behind the shuttered windows, he had not known exactly. He had called these occupants "they," and the most important among them was "The Ruler." The Ruler of the Other Wing was a kind of deity, powerful, far away, ever present yet never seen.

And about this Ruler he had a wonderful conception for a little boy; he connected her, somehow, with deep thoughts of his own, the deepest of all. When he made up adventures to the moon, to the stars, or to the bottom of the sea, adventures that he lived inside himself, as it were--to reach them he must invariably pass through the chambers of the Other Wing. Those corridors and halls, the Nightmare Passage among them, lay along the route; they were the first stage of the journey.

Once the green baize doors swung to behind him and the long dim passage stretched ahead, he was well on his way into the adventure of the moment; the Nightmare Passage once passed, he was safe from capture; but once the shutters of a window had been flung open, he was free of the gigantic world that lay beyond. For then light poured in and he could see his way.

The conception, for a child, was curious. It established a correspondence between the mysterious chambers of the Other Wing and the occupied, but unguessed chambers of his Inner Being. Through these chambers, through these darkened corridors, along a passage, sometimes dangerous, or at least of questionable repute, he must pass to find all adventures that were _real_. The light--when he pierced far enough to take the shutters down--was discovery. Tim did not actually think, much less say, all this. He was aware of it, however. He felt it. The Other Wing was inside himself as well as through the green baize doors. His inner map of wonder included both of them.

But now, for the first time in his life, he knew who lived there and who the Ruler was. A shutter had fallen of its own accord; light poured in; he made a guess, and Mother had confirmed it. Sleep and her Little Ones, the host of dreams, were the daylight occupants. They stole out when the darkness fell. All adventures in life began and ended by a dream--discoverable by first passing through the Other Wing.

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And, having settled this, his one desire now was to travel over the map upon journeys of exploration and discovery. The map inside himself he knew already, but the map of the Other Wing he had not seen. His mind knew it, he had a clear mental picture of rooms and halls and passages, but his feet had never trod the silent floors where dust and shadows hid the flock of dreams by day. The mighty chambers where Sleep ruled he longed to stand in, to see the Ruler face to face. He made up his mind to get into the Other Wing.

To accomplish this was difficult; but Tim was a determined youngster, and he meant to try; he meant, also, to succeed. He deliberated. At night he could not possibly manage it; in any case, the Ruler and her host all left it after dark, to fly about the world; the Wing would be empty, and the emptiness would frighten him. Therefore he must make a daylight visit; and it was a daylight visit he decided on. He deliberated more. There were rules and risks involved: it meant going out of bounds, the danger of being seen, the certainty of being questioned by some idle and inquisitive grown-up: "Where in the world have you been all this time"--and so forth. These things he thought out carefully, and though he arrived at no solution, he felt satisfied that it would be all right. That is, he recognised the risks. To be prepared

was half the battle, for nothing then could take him by surprise.

The notion that he might slip in from the garden was soon abandoned; the red bricks showed no openings; there was no door; from the courtyard, also, entrance was impracticable; even on tiptoe he could barely reach the broad window-sills of stone. When playing alone, or walking with the French governess, he examined every outside possibility. None offered. The shutters, supposing he could reach them, were thick and solid.

Meanwhile, when opportunity offered, he stood against the outside walls and listened, his ear pressed against the tight red bricks; the towers and gables of the Wing rose overhead; he heard the wind go whispering along the eaves; he imagined tiptoe movements and a sound of wings inside. Sleep and her Little Ones were busily preparing for their journeys after dark; they hid, but they did not sleep; in this unused Wing, vaster alone than any other country house he had ever seen, Sleep taught and trained her flock of feathered Dreams. It was very wonderful. They probably supplied the entire county. But more wonderful still was the thought that the Ruler herself should take the trouble to come to his particular room and personally watch over him all night long. That was amazing. And it flashed across his imaginative, inquiring mind: "Perhaps they take me with them! The moment I'm asleep! That's why she comes to see me!"

Yet his chief preoccupation was, how Sleep got out. Through the green baize doors, of course! By a process of elimination he arrived at a conclusion: he, too, must enter through a green baize door and risk detection.

Of late, the lightning visits had ceased. The silent, darting figure had not peeped in and vanished as it used to do. He fell asleep too quickly now, almost before Jackman reached the hall, and long before the fire began to die. Also, the dogs and birds upon the curtains always matched the trees exactly, and he won the curtain game quite easily; there was never a dog or bird too many; the curtain never stirred. It had been thus ever since his talk with Mother and Father. And so he came to make a second discovery: His parents did not really believe in his Figure. She kept away on that account. They doubted her; she hid. Here was still another incentive to go and find her out. He ached for her, she was so kind, she gave herself so much trouble--just for his little self in the big and lonely bedroom. Yet his parents spoke of her as though she were of no account. He longed to see her, face to face, and tell her that he believed in her and loved her. For he was positive she would like to hear it. She cared. Though he had fallen asleep of late too quickly for him to see her flash in at the door, he had known nicer dreams than ever in his life before--travelling dreams. And it was she who sent them. More--he was sure she took him out with her.

One evening, in the dusk of a March day, his opportunity came; and only just in time, for his brother Jack was expected home from school on the morrow, and with Jack in the other bed, no Figure would ever care to show itself. Also it was Easter, and after Easter, though Tim was not aware of it at the time, he was to say good-bye finally to governesses and become a day-boarder at a preparatory school for Wellington. The opportunity offered itself so naturally, moreover, that Tim took it without hesitation. It never occurred to him to question, much less to refuse it. The thing was obviously meant to be. For he found himself unexpectedly in front of a green baize door; and the green baize door was--swinging! Somebody, therefore, had just passed through it.

It had come about in this wise. Father, away in Scotland, at Inglemuir, the shooting place, was expected back next morning; Mother had driven over to the church upon some Easter business or other; and the governess had been allowed her holiday at home in France. Tim, therefore, had the run of the house, and in the hour between tea and bed-time he made good use of it. Fully able to defy such second-rate obstacles as nurses and butlers, he explored all manner of forbidden places with ardent thoroughness, arriving finally in the sacred precincts of his father's study. This wonderful room was the very heart and centre of the whole big house; he had been birched here long ago; here, too, his father had told him with a grave yet smiling face: "You've got a new companion, Tim, a little sister; you must be very kind to her." Also, it was the place where all the money was kept. What he called "father's jolly smell" was strong in it--papers, tobacco, books, flavoured by hunting crops and gunpowder.

At first he felt awed, standing motionless just inside the door; but presently, recovering equilibrium, he moved cautiously on tiptoe towards the gigantic desk where important papers were piled in untidy patches. These he did not touch; but beside them his quick eye noted the jagged piece of iron shell his father brought home from his Crimean campaign and now used as a letter-weight. It was difficult to lift, however. He climbed into the comfortable chair and swung round and round. It was a swivel-chair, and he sank down among the cushions in it, staring at the strange things on the great desk before him, as if fascinated. Next he turned away and saw the stick-rack in the corner--this, he knew, he was allowed to touch. He had played with these sticks before. There were twenty, perhaps, all told, with curious carved handles, brought from every corner of the world; many of them cut by his father's own hand in queer and distant places. And, among them, Tim fixed his eye upon a cane with an ivory handle, a slender, polished cane that he had always coveted tremendously. It was the kind he meant to use when he was a man. It bent, it quivered, and when he swished it through the air it trembled like a riding-whip, and made a whistling noise. Yet it was very strong in spite of its elastic qualities. A family treasure, it was also an old-fashioned relic; it

had been his grandfather's walking stick. Something of another century clung visibly about it still. It had dignity and grace and leisure in its very aspect. And it suddenly occurred to him: "How grandpapa must miss it! Wouldn't he just love to have it back again!"

How it happened exactly, Tim did not know, but a few minutes later he found himself walking about the deserted halls and passages of the house with the air of an elderly gentleman of a hundred years ago, proud as a courtier, flourishing the stick like an Eighteenth Century dandy in the Mall. That the cane reached to his shoulder made no difference; he held it accordingly, swaggering on his way. He was off upon an adventure. He dived down through the byways of the Other Wing, inside himself, as though the stick transported him to the days of the old gentleman who had used it in another century.

It may seem strange to those who dwell in smaller houses, but in this rambling Elizabethan mansion there were whole sections that, even to Tim, were strange and unfamiliar. In his mind the map of the Other Wing was clearer by far than the geography of the part he travelled daily. He came to passages and dim-lit halls, long corridors of stone beyond the Picture Gallery; narrow, wainscoted connecting-channels with four steps down and a little later two steps up; deserted chambers with arches guarding them--all hung with the soft March twilight and all bewilderingly unrecognised. With a sense of adventure born of naughtiness he went carelessly along, farther and farther into the heart of this unfamiliar country, swinging the cane, one thumb stuck into the arm-pit of his blue serge suit, whistling softly to himself, excited yet keenly on the alert--and suddenly found himself opposite a door that checked all further advance. It was a green baize door. And it was swinging.

He stopped abruptly, facing it. He stared, he gripped his cane more tightly, he held his breath. "The Other Wing!" he gasped in a swallowed whisper. It was an entrance, but an entrance he had never seen before. He thought he knew every door by heart; but this one was new. He stood motionless for several minutes, watching it; the door had two halves, but one half only was swinging, each swing shorter than the one before; he heard the little puffs of air it made; it settled finally, the last movements very short and rapid; it stopped. And the boy's heart, after similar rapid strokes, stopped also--for a moment.

"Some one's just gone through," he gulped. And even as he said it he knew who the some one was. The conviction just dropped into him. "It's Grandfather; he knows I've got his stick. He wants it!" On the heels of this flashed instantly another amazing certainty. "He sleeps in there. He's having dreams. That's what being dead means."

His first impulse, then, took the form of, "I must let Father know; it'll make him burst for joy"; but his second was for himself--to

finish his adventure. And it was this, naturally enough, that gained the day. He could tell his father later. His first duty was plainly to go through the door into the Other Wing. He must give the stick back to its owner. He must _hand_ it back.

The test of will and character came now. Tim had imagination, and so knew the meaning of fear; but there was nothing craven in him. He could howl and scream and stamp like any other person of his age when the occasion called for such behaviour, but such occasions were due to temper roused by a thwarted will, and the histrionics were half "pretended" to produce a calculated effect. There was no one to thwart his will at present. He also knew how to be afraid of Nothing, to be afraid without ostensible cause, that is--which was merely "nerves." He could have "the shudders" with the best of them.

But, when a real thing faced him, Tim's character emerged to meet it. He would clench his hands, brace his muscles, set his teeth--and wish to heaven he was bigger. But he would not flinch. Being imaginative, he lived the worst a dozen times before it happened, yet in the final crash he stood up like a man. He had that highest pluck--the courage of a sensitive temperament. And at this particular juncture, somewhat ticklish for a boy of eight or nine, it did not fail him. He lifted the cane and pushed the swinging door wide open. Then he walked through it--into the Other Wing.

3

The green baize door swung to behind him; he was even sufficiently master of himself to turn and close it with a steady hand, because he did not care to hear the series of muffled thuds its lessening swings would cause. But he realised clearly his position, knew he was doing a tremendous thing.

Holding the cane between fingers very tightly clenched, he advanced bravely along the corridor that stretched before him. And all fear left him from that moment, replaced, it seemed, by a mild and exquisite surprise. His footsteps made no sound, he walked on air; instead of darkness, or the twilight he expected, a diffused and gentle light that seemed like the silver on the lawn when a half-moon sails a cloudless sky, lay everywhere. He knew his way, moreover, knew exactly where he was and whither he was going. The corridor was as familiar to him as the floor of his own bedroom; he recognised the shape and length of it; it agreed exactly with the map he had constructed long ago. Though he had never, to the best of his knowledge, entered it before, he knew with intimacy its every detail.

And thus the surprise he felt was mild and far from disconcerting. "I'm here again!" was the kind of thought he had. It was _how_ he

got here that caused the faint surprise, apparently. He no longer swaggered, however, but walked carefully, and half on tiptoe, holding the ivory handle of the cane with a kind of affectionate respect. And as he advanced, the light closed softly up behind him, obliterating the way by which he had come. But this he did not know, because he did not look behind him. He only looked in front, where the corridor stretched its silvery length towards the great chamber where he knew the cane must be surrendered. The person who had preceded him down this ancient corridor, passing through the green baize door just before he reached it, this person, his father's father, now stood in that great chamber, waiting to receive his own. Tim knew it as surely as he knew he breathed. At the far end he even made out the larger patch of silvery light which marked its gaping doorway.

There was another thing he knew as well--that this corridor he moved along between rooms with fast-closed doors, was the Nightmare Corridor; often and often he had traversed it; each room was occupied. "This is the Nightmare Passage," he whispered to himself, "but I know the Ruler--it doesn't matter. None of them can get out or do anything." He heard them, none the less, inside, as he passed by; he heard them scratching to get out. The feeling of security made him reckless; he took unnecessary risks; he brushed the panels as he passed. And the love of keen sensation for its own sake, the desire to feel "an awful thrill," tempted him once so sharply that he raised his stick and poked a fast-shut door with it!

He was not prepared for the result, but he gained the sensation and the thrill. For the door opened with instant swiftness half an inch, a hand emerged, caught the stick and tried to draw it in. Tim sprang back as if he had been struck. He pulled at the ivory handle with all his strength, but his strength was less than nothing. He tried to shout, but his voice had gone. A terror of the moon came over him, for he was unable to loosen his hold of the handle; his fingers had become a part of it. An appalling weakness turned him helpless. He was dragged inch by inch towards the fearful door. The end of the stick was already through the narrow, crack. He could not see the hand that pulled, but he knew it was terrific. He understood now why the world was strange, why horses galloped furiously, and why trains whistled as they raced through stations. All the comedy and terror of nightmare gripped his heart with pincers made of ice. The disproportion was abominable. The final collapse rushed over him when, without a sign of warning, the door slammed silently, and between the jamb and the wall the cane was crushed as flat as if it were a bulrush. So irresistible was the force behind the door that the solid stick just went flat as a stalk of a bulrush.

He looked at it. It was a bulrush.

He did not laugh; the absurdity was so distressingly unnatural. The

horror of finding a bulrush where he had expected a polished cane--this hideous and appalling detail held the nameless horror of the nightmare. It betrayed him utterly. Why had he not always known really that the stick was not a stick, but a thin and hollow reed...?

Then the cane was safely in his hand, unbroken. He stood looking at it. The Nightmare was in full swing. He heard another door opening behind his back, a door he had not touched. There was just time to see a hand thrusting and waving dreadfully, familiarly, at him through the narrow crack--just time to realise that this was another Nightmare acting in atrocious concert with the first, when he saw closely beside him, towering to the ceiling, the protective, kindly Figure that visited his bedroom. In the turning movement he made to meet the attack, he became aware of her. And his terror passed. It was a nightmare terror merely. The infinite horror vanished. Only the comedy remained. He smiled.

He saw her dimly only, she was so vast, but he saw her, the Ruler of the Other Wing at last, and knew that he was safe again. He gazed with a tremendous love and wonder, trying to see her clearly; but the face was hidden far aloft and seemed to melt into the sky beyond the roof. He discerned that she was larger than the Night, only far, far softer, with wings that folded above him more tenderly even than his mother's arms; that there were points of light like stars among the feathers, and that she was vast enough to cover millions and millions of people all at once. Moreover, she did not fade or go, so far as he could see, but spread herself in such a way that he lost sight of her. She spread over the entire Wing....

And Tim remembered that this was all quite natural really. He had often and often been down this corridor before; the Nightmare Corridor was no new experience; it had to be faced as usual. Once knowing what hid inside the rooms, he was bound to tempt them out. They drew, enticed, attracted him; this was their power. It was their special strength that they could suck him helplessly towards them, and that he was obliged to go. He understood exactly why he was tempted to tap with the cane upon their awful doors, but, having done so, he had accepted the challenge and could now continue his journey quietly and safely. The Ruler of the Other Wing had taken him in charge.

A delicious sense of carelessness came on him. There was softness as of water in the solid things about him, nothing that could hurt or bruise. Holding the cane firmly by its ivory handle, he went forward along the corridor, walking as on air.

The end was quickly reached: He stood upon the threshold of the mighty chamber where he knew the owner of the cane was waiting; the long corridor lay behind him, in front he saw the spacious dimensions of a lofty hall that gave him the feeling of being in the Crystal Palace, Euston Station, or St. Paul's. High, narrow windows, cut deeply

into the wall, stood in a row upon the other side; an enormous open fireplace of burning logs was on his right; thick tapestries hung from the ceiling to the floor of stone; and in the centre of the chamber was a massive table of dark, shining wood, great chairs with carved stiff backs set here and there beside it. And in the biggest of these throne-like chairs there sat a figure looking at him gravely--the figure of an old, old man.

Yet there was no surprise in the boy's fast-beating heart; there was a thrill of pleasure and excitement only, a feeling of satisfaction. He had known quite well the figure would be there, known also it would look like this exactly. He stepped forward on to the floor of stone without a trace of fear or trembling, holding the precious cane in two hands now before him, as though to present it to its owner. He felt proud and pleased. He had run risks for this.

And the figure rose quietly to meet him, advancing in a stately manner over the hard stone floor. The eyes looked gravely, sweetly down at him, the aquiline nose stood out. Tim knew him perfectly: the knee-breeches of shining satin, the gleaming buckles on the shoes, the neat dark stockings, the lace and ruffles about neck and wrists, the coloured waistcoat opening so widely--all the details of the picture over father's mantelpiece, where it hung between two Crimean bayonets, were reproduced in life before his eyes at last. Only the polished cane with the ivory handle was not there.

Tim went three steps nearer to the advancing figure and held out both his hands with the cane laid crosswise on them.

"I've brought it, Grandfather," he said, in a faint but clear and steady tone; "here it is."

And the other stooped a little, put out three fingers half concealed by falling lace, and took it by the ivory handle. He made a courtly bow to Tim. He smiled, but though there was pleasure, it was a grave, sad smile. He spoke then: the voice was slow and very deep. There was a delicate softness in it, the suave politeness of an older day.

"Thank you," he said; "I value it. It was given to me by my grandfather. I forgot it when I----" His voice grew indistinct a little.

"Yes?" said Tim.

"When I--left," the old gentleman repeated.

"Oh," said Tim, thinking how beautiful and kind the gracious figure was.

The old man ran his slender fingers carefully along the cane, feeling the polished surface with satisfaction. He lingered specially over the

smoothness of the ivory handle. He was evidently very pleased.

"I was not quite myself--er--at the moment," he went on gently; "my memory failed me somewhat." He sighed, as though an immense relief was in him.

"_I_ forget things, too--sometimes," Tim mentioned sympathetically. He simply loved his grandfather. He hoped--for a moment--he would be lifted up and kissed. "I'm _awfully_ glad I brought it," he faltered--"that you've got it again."

The other turned his kind grey eyes upon him; the smile on his face was full of gratitude as he looked down.

"Thank you, my boy. I am truly and deeply indebted to you. You courted danger for my sake. Others have tried before, but the Nightmare Passage--er----" He broke off. He tapped the stick firmly on the stone flooring, as though to test it. Bending a trifle, he put his weight upon it. "Ah!" he exclaimed with a short sigh of relief, "I can now----"

His voice again grew indistinct; Tim did not catch the words.

"Yes?" he asked again, aware for the first time that a touch of awe was in his heart.

"--get about again," the other continued very low. "Without my cane," he added, the voice failing with each word the old lips uttered, "I could not ... possibly ... allow myself ... to be seen. It was indeed ... deplorable ... unpardonable of me ... to forget in such a way. Zounds, sir...! I--I ..."

His voice sank away suddenly into a sound of wind. He straightened up, tapping the iron ferrule of his cane on the stones in a series of loud knocks. Tim felt a strange sensation creep into his legs. The queer words frightened him a little.

The old man took a step towards him. He still smiled, but there was a new meaning in the smile. A sudden earnestness had replaced the courtly, leisurely manner. The next words seemed to blow down upon the boy from above, as though a cold wind brought them from the sky outside.

Yet the words, he knew, were kindly meant, and very sensible. It was only the abrupt change that startled him. Grandfather, after all, was but a man! The distant sound recalled something in him to that outside world from which the cold wind blew.

"My eternal thanks to you," he heard, while the voice and face and figure seemed to withdraw deeper and deeper into the heart of the mighty chamber. "I shall not forget your kindness and your courage. It

is a debt I can, fortunately, one day repay.... But now you had best return and with dispatch. For your head and arm lie heavily on the table, the documents are scattered, there is a cushion fallen ... and my son is in the house.... Farewell! You had best leave me quickly. See! _She_ stands behind you, waiting. Go with her! Go now...!"

The entire scene had vanished even before the final words were uttered. Tim felt empty space about him. A vast, shadowy Figure bore him through it as with mighty wings. He flew, he rushed, he remembered nothing more--until he heard another voice and felt a heavy hand upon his shoulder.

"Tim, you rascal! What are you doing in my study? And in the dark, like this!"

He looked up into his father's face without a word. He felt dazed. The next minute his father had caught him up and kissed him.

"Ragamuffin! How did you guess I was coming back to-night?" He shook him playfully and kissed his tumbling hair. "And you've been asleep, too, into the bargain. Well--how's everything at home--eh? Jack's coming back from school to-morrow, you know, and ..."

4

Jack came home, indeed, the following day, and when the Easter holidays were over, the governess stayed abroad and Tim went off to adventures of another kind in the preparatory school for Wellington. Life slipped rapidly along with him; he grew into a man; his mother and his father died; Jack followed them within a little space; Tim inherited, married, settled down into his great possessions--and opened up the Other Wing. The dreams of imaginative boyhood all had faded; perhaps he had merely put them away, or perhaps he had forgotten them. At any rate, he never spoke of such things now, and when his Irish wife mentioned her belief that the old country house possessed a family ghost, even declaring that she had met an Eighteenth Century figure of a man in the corridors, "an old, old man who bends down upon a stick"--Tim only laughed and said:

"That's as it ought to be! And if these awful land-taxes force us to sell some day, a respectable ghost will increase the market value."

But one night he woke and heard a tapping on the floor. He sat up in bed and listened. There was a chilly feeling down his back. Belief had long since gone out of him; he felt uncannily afraid. The sound came nearer and nearer; there were light footsteps with it. The door opened--it opened a little wider, that is, for it already stood ajar--and there upon the threshold stood a figure that it seemed he

knew. He saw the face as with all the vivid sharpness of reality. There was a smile upon it, but a smile of warning and alarm. The arm was raised. Tim saw the slender hand, lace falling down upon the long, thin fingers, and in them, tightly gripped, a polished cane. Shaking the cane twice to and fro in the air, the face thrust forward, spoke certain words, and--vanished. But the words were inaudible; for, though the lips distinctly moved, no sound, apparently, came from them.

And Tim sprang out of bed. The room was full of darkness. He turned the light on. The door, he saw, was shut as usual. He had, of course, been dreaming. But he noticed a curious odour in the air. He sniffed it once or twice--then grasped the truth. It was a smell of burning!

Fortunately, he awoke just in time....

He was acclaimed a hero for his promptitude. After many days, when the damage was repaired, and nerves had settled down once more into the calm routine of country life, he told the story to his wife--the entire story. He told the adventure of his imaginative boyhood with it. She asked to see the old family cane. And it was this request of hers that brought back to memory a detail Tim had entirely forgotten all these years. He remembered it suddenly again--the loss of the cane, the hubbub his father kicked up about it, the endless, futile search. For the stick had never been found, and Tim, who was questioned very closely concerning it, swore with all his might that he had not the smallest notion where it was. Which was, of course, the truth.

THE TRUTH ABOUT GOLDFISH

by H. KUTTNER

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Futuria Fantasia, Fall 1939*, by Ray Bradbury

For some time I have been wondering what the world is coming to. More than once I have got up in the middle of the nite, padded toward the bureau, and, peering into the mirror, exclaimed, "Stinky, what is the world coming to?" The responses I have thus obtained I am not at liberty to reveal; but I am coming to believe that either I have a most mysterious mirror or something is wrong somewhere. I am intrigued by my mirror.

It came into my possession under extraordinary and eerie circumstances, being borne into my bedroom one Midsummer's Eve by a procession of cats dressed oddly in bright-colored sunsuits and carrying parasols. I was asleep at the time, but awoke just as the last tail whisked out the door, and immediately I sprang out of bed and cut my left big toe rather badly on the edge of the mirror. I remember that as I first looked into the fathomless, glassy depths, a curious thot came into my mind. "What," I said to myself, "is the world coming to? And what is science-fiction coming to?"

It is quite evident that a logical and critical analysis of science-fictional trends is a desideratum today. The whole trouble, I feel, can be laid to velleity. (I have wanted to use that word for years. Unfortunately I have now forgotten exactly what it means, but one can safely attribute trouble to it. Where was I?)

Today science-fiction is split by schisms and impaled on the trylon of bad thots. The fans, I mean, not the writers. The writers have been split and impaled for years, but nothing can be done about that. In a way, it's a good thing. Look at Jules Verne, Victor Hugo, and, for that matter, the late unfortunate Tobias J. Koot.

I put flowers on his grave only yesterday. He lies at rest, tho his ghastly fate pursued him even to the grave. And I attribute Mr. Koot's fate to nothing less than the schisms of fandom. For Koot was a hard working young man, serious, earnest, with promise of becoming a first-class writer. He took life very solemnly--almost grimly. "My job," he told me once, "is to give people what they want."

"I want a drink," I said to him. "Give me one."

But Koot couldn't be turned from his rash course. He began to write science-fiction. That was where the trouble started. "Is it science?" he pondered. "Or is it fiction?" Already the cleavage--the split--had begun.

It was a matter of logical progression toward ultimate division. Koot got in the habit of typing the science into his stories with his left hand, and the fiction with his right. He began to twitch and worry. He got up nites. He was troubled, uneasy. "I have one thing left to cling to," he muttered desperately, "Fandom! I can point to that and say: It is real. It exists. It is dependable."

When fandom had its schism, Koot immediately developed a split personality. It was rather horrible. His left side--the scientific side--grew cold and hard and keen. He grew a Van Dyke on the left side of his face and his left hand was stained with acids and chemicals. But the right side of his face became dissipated and disreputable, with a leer in the eye end a scornful, sneering curve to the lip. He grew a tiny moustache on the right side, waxed it, and twirled it continually. It was rather horrid, but worse was yet to come.

One day the inevitable happened. Tobias J. Koot split in half, with a faint ripping sound and a despairing wail. He was, of course, buried in two coffins and in two graves, the wretched man's fate pursuing him even beyond death.

Well, you can understand how I feel, what with the mirror, the cats in

sunsuits and the weasel. Or haven't I mentioned the weasel? I mean the brown one, of course, and he is, perhaps, worst of all. It isn't what he says so much as his sneering, ironic tone. The other weasels, who live in the spare bedroom with the colt, were happy enuf till HE arrived, but now THEY are arranging a schism. As you will readily see, something must be done about it before science-fiction collapses and the standard falls trailing into the dust.

I suggest that we mobilize, and, to avoid dissension, give everybody the rank of general. Then, first of all, we can march to my house and get rid of that weasel.

The Brown One, of course. The others are welcome to stay as long as they like. I feel that they are weak rather than wicked, and need only a good excuse, or should I say example, in order to brace themselves up.

Contributions to the fund for the mobilization of science-fiction and the extermination of brown weasels may be sent to me in care of this magazine. Do not delay. Each moment you wait brings us closer to doom, and, besides, I need a new piano.

H.K.

THE CREEPING FINGERS

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Bizarre*, by Lawton Mackall

Mrs. Whoffin's figure resembled that of the punch-bowl behind which she was standing: it was broad and squat, with a slight tapering at the base. And her mind was like the punch: sweetish and characterless, with scrappy rinds of things floating about in it. Each guest who presented a cup received the same dipperful and the same set of remarks.

"Good evening. I'm _so_ glad you could come! I just love hearing ghost-stories, don't you? See that log over there?" She pointed to a huge gray hulk that lay at the side of the open fireplace. "That's _real driftwood_, and it ought to give just the right kind of light. I found it myself on the beach, and had the gardener bring it home in a wheelbarrow. Look, it's all honeycombed with age."

A tall, serious-looking young man stepped forward and extended his glass. He knew that that was the way to please her, and she was the woman who he hoped and feared would be his mother-in-law.

She beamed.

"Do have another, Mr. Carson."

He did; for he was in a desperate mood. He was to leave for the city on the early morning train, and this evening would be his last chance to propose to Polly for several months. Somehow, despite his best efforts, the psychological moment had never arrived.

Just then Polly sailed into the room, fresh and rosy, in a flutter of white muslin. He put down the glass and hurried over to her.

"Good evening, Polly," he said in an ardent undertone. "Couldn't you slip away from this crowd and take a stroll on the beach?"

"No, George; I'm hostess tonight." She shook her head, including some airy little curls, which seemed to make light of her refusal. "We are all to gather around the hearth and listen to the stories." Then she added teasingly, "Besides, it is in your honor that mother is giving this party."

"Yes; she's very kind, I'm sure," he said awkwardly.

"Think of all the trouble she has taken over that log!"

Carson faced her with squared jaw.

"Listen to me, Polly. There is something serious I want to talk to you about. Before I leave you, I--"

"Polly," called Mrs. Whoffin, "isn't it time to begin?"

"Perhaps it is," she answered innocently. "What do you think, George?"

"I think the story-telling might as well begin at once," he said stiffly.

A few minutes later all lights were turned out. The score of young people had settled themselves about the room in comfortable attitudes, some on chairs and sofas, some on cushions on the floor, while in the midst of them sat the narrator, a girl of eighteen, who affected a deep morbidity. Gazing into the fire, she began her tale as though she were in a trance.

Carson sulkily picked his way after Polly toward a seat beside the hearth. Just as he was reaching it, he tripped over something bulky.

"Why, that's my log!" exclaimed Mrs. Whoffin, from the back of the room. "Dear! dear! Why hasn't anyone put it on the fire?" The story waited while Mrs. Whoffin scurried forward and personally supervised the placing of the log upon the andirons, and then sat down beside the hearth opposite Polly.

"Do go on!" cried several voices. "You stopped in the most exciting part."

The narrator, looking daggers at Mrs. Whoffin, paused long enough to show that she didn't _have_ to go on unless she wanted to, and then resumed her tale:

"Suddenly, as he lay there in the haunted room, on the very bed where the old man had been murdered, he felt an invisible hand on the bedclothes."

Mrs. Whoffin shuddered, and a large black ant peered out of a hole in the log to see what was going on.

"Then he felt a second hand more terrifying than the first."

Beholding his home in flames, the ant rushed back indoors to spread the alarm. Along the highways of the interior he sped, a second Paul Revere, rousing the sleeping insects, of which there were many.

"Oh!" groaned Mrs. Whoffin.

The exodus of Paul's friends proceeded in orderly fashion. "Larvæ and eggs first," was their order. Carrying their infants upon their backs, they filed out of the subway openings in steady processions.

"The hands clutched the covers just above his feet. Fear paralyzed him so that he could neither move nor cry out."

A party of refugees applied to Mrs. Whoffin for shelter. She was so absorbed in the story that she did not see them.

"Then the fingers began to creep up and up, up and up. His flesh tingled with horror."

Mrs. Whoffin quivered like an aspen leaf. She breathed hard, her eyes nearly popping. Other people began to feel creepy.

"They clutched his knee, and--"

Mrs. Whoffin uttered a piercing shriek, and clasped her knee with both hands. She was invaded. Then Polly screamed, and Carson began to slap himself on various parts of the anatomy. There was a general panic. Girls squealed and, clambering frantically upon chairs, shook out their lifted skirts; young men stamped about wildly, mashing ants and people's toes in equal numbers. Mrs. Whoffin, tormented from head to foot, galloped in circles, moaning, "Oh mercy! Oh mercy!"

"Save me, George!" cried Polly, clinging to his arm.

"Yes, darling!" he answered fervently. If the ants had been raging bulls, he would have saved her from them; but they were ants, and their ways were devious. He hesitated, slapping himself thoughtfully.

"Turn on the lights!" yelled some one.

"No! Don't!" screamed half a dozen shrill voices.

"Save me!" repeated Polly, distractedly. "I can't stand this any longer! I'll perish!"

Struck with a swift inspiration, he caught her up in his arms and started for the door. She made no resistance. Out of the room he carried her, then through the front hall, and down the front steps.

Half-way down the walk she asked:

"Where are you taking me?"

"To the ocean."

"Why, you clever boy!"

People sitting on the verandas of neighboring cottages saw in the moonlight a sight that electrified them with horror. A powerful looking maniac, with a helpless woman in his arms, strode across the beach and began to wade out into the water. Hoping to save her, they ran to the shore and put out in boats and canoes.

"Oh," sighed the victim, blissfully, as Carson let her down into the water, "it feels so cool--and _quiet_!"

"Polly!"

"George!"

"Row harder, Doctor!" cried the steersman of the nearest boat. "He's trying to strangle her!"

HOW THESEUS SLAYS THE MINOTAUR

By Nathaniel Hawthorne

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In the old city of Trœzene, at the foot of a lofty mountain, there lived,

a very long time ago, a little boy named Theseus. His grandfather, King Pittheus, was the sovereign of that country, and was reckoned a very wise man; so that Theseus, being brought up in the royal palace, and being naturally a bright lad, could hardly fail of profiting by the old king's instructions. His mother's name was Æthra. As for his father, the boy had never seen him. But, from his earliest remembrance, Æthra used to go with little Theseus into a wood, and sit down upon a moss-grown rock, which was deeply sunken into the earth. Here she often talked with her son about his father, and said that he was called Ægeus, and that he was a great king, and ruled over Attica, and dwelt at Athens, which was as famous a city as any in the world. Theseus was very fond of hearing about King Ægeus, and often asked his good mother Æthra why he did not come and live with them at Trœzene.

"Ah, my dear son," answered Æthra, with a sigh, "a monarch has his people to take care of. The men and women over whom he rules are in the place of children to him; and he can seldom spare time to love his own children as other parents do. Your father will never be able to leave his kingdom for the sake of seeing his little boy."

"Well, but, dear mother," asked the boy, "why cannot I go to this famous city of Athens, and tell King Ægeus that I am his son?"

"That may happen by-and-by," said Æthra. "Be patient, and we shall see. You are not yet big and strong enough to set out on such an errand."

"And how soon shall I be strong enough?" Theseus persisted in inquiring.

"You are but a tiny boy as yet," replied his mother. "See if you can lift this rock on which we are sitting."

The little fellow had a great opinion of his own strength. So, grasping the rough protuberances of the rock, he tugged and toiled amain, and got himself quite out of breath, without being able to stir the heavy stone. It seemed to be rooted into the ground. No wonder he could not move it; for it would have taken all the force of a very strong man to lift it out of its earthy bed.

His mother stood looking on, with a sad kind of a smile on her lips and in her eyes, to see the zealous and yet puny efforts of her little boy. She could not help being sorrowful at finding him already so impatient to begin his adventures in the world.

"You see how it is, my dear Theseus," said she, "you must possess far more strength than now before I can trust you to go to Athens, and tell King Ægeus that you are his son. But when you can lift this rock, and show me what is hidden beneath it, I promise you my permission to depart."

Often and often, after this, did Theseus ask his mother, whether it was

yet time for him to go to Athens; and still his mother pointed to the rock, and told him that, for years to come, he could not be strong enough to move it. And again and again the rosy-cheeked and curly-headed boy would tug and strain at the huge mass of stone, striving, child as he was, to do what a giant could hardly have done without taking both of his great hands to the task. Meanwhile the rock seemed to be sinking farther and farther into the ground. The moss grew over it thicker and thicker, until at last it looked almost like a soft green seat, with only a few gray knobs of granite peeping out. The overhanging trees, also, shed their brown leaves upon it, as often as the autumn came; and at its base grew ferns and wild flowers, some of which crept quite over its surface. To all appearance, the rock was as firmly fastened as any other portion of the earth's substance.

But, difficult as the matter looked, Theseus was now growing up to be such a vigorous youth, that, in his own opinion, the time would quickly come when he might hope to get the upper hand of this ponderous lump of stone.

"Mother, I do believe it has started!" cried he, after one of his attempts. "The earth around it is certainly a little cracked!"

"No, no, child!" his mother hastily answered. "It is not possible you can have moved it, such a boy as you still are."

Nor would she be convinced, although Theseus showed her the place where he fancied that the stem of a flower had been partly uprooted by the movement of the rock. But Æthra sighed and looked disquieted; for, no doubt, she began to be conscious that her son was no longer a child, and that, in a little while hence, she must send him forth among the perils and troubles of the world.

It was not more than a year afterwards when they were again sitting on the moss-covered stone. Æthra had once more told him the oft-repeated story of his father, and how gladly he would receive Theseus at his stately palace, and how he would present him to his courtiers and the people, and tell them that here was the heir of his dominions. The eyes of Theseus glowed with enthusiasm, and he would hardly sit still to hear his mother speak.

"Dear mother Æthra," he exclaimed, "I never felt half so strong as now! I am no longer a child, nor a boy, nor a mere youth! I feel myself a man! It is now time to make one earnest trial to remove the stone."

"Ah, my dearest Theseus," replied his mother, "not yet! not yet!"

"Yes, mother," said he, resolutely, "the time has come!"

Then Theseus bent himself in good earnest to the task, and strained

every sinew, with manly strength and resolution. He put his whole brave heart into the effort. He wrestled with the big and sluggish stone, as if it had been a living enemy. He heaved, he lifted, he resolved now to succeed, or else to perish there, and let the rock be his monument for ever! Æthra stood gazing at him, and clasped her hands, partly with a mother's pride, and partly with a mother's sorrow. The great rock stirred! Yes, it was raised slowly from the bedded moss and earth, uprooting the shrubs and flowers along with it, and was turned upon its side. Theseus had conquered!

While taking breath, he looked joyfully at his mother, and she smiled upon him through her tears.

"Yes, Theseus," she said, "the time has come, and you must stay no longer at my side! See what King Ægeus, your royal father, left for you, beneath the stone, when he lifted it in his mighty arms, and laid it on the spot whence you have now removed it."

Theseus looked, and saw that the rock had been placed over another slab of stone, containing a cavity within it; so that it somewhat resembled a roughly-made chest or coffer, of which the upper mass had served as the lid. Within the cavity lay a sword, with a golden hilt, and a pair of sandals.

"That was your father's sword," said Æthra, "and those were his sandals. When he went to be King of Athens, he bade me treat you as a child until you should prove yourself a man by lifting this heavy stone. That task being accomplished, you are to put on his sandals, in order to follow in your father's footsteps, and to gird on his sword, so that you may fight giants and dragons, as King Ægeus did in his youth."

"I will set out for Athens this very day!" cried Theseus.

But his mother persuaded him to stay a day or two longer, while she got ready some necessary articles for his journey. When his grandfather, the wise King Pittheus, heard that Theseus intended to present himself at his father's palace, he earnestly advised him to get on board of a vessel, and go by sea; because he might thus arrive within fifteen miles of Athens, without either fatigue or danger.

"The roads are very bad by land," quoth the venerable king; "and they are terribly infested with robbers and monsters. A mere lad, like Theseus, is not fit to be trusted on such a perilous journey, all by himself. No, no; let him go by sea!"

But when Theseus heard of robbers and monsters, he pricked up his ears, and was so much the more eager to take the road along which they were to be met with. On the third day, therefore, he bade a respectful farewell to his grandfather, thanking him for all his kindness, and, after

affectionately embracing his mother, he set forth, with a good many of her tears glistening on his cheeks, and some, if the truth must be told, that had gushed out of his own eyes. But he let the sun and wind dry them, and walked stoutly on, playing with the golden hilt of his sword, and taking very manly strides in his father's sandals.

I cannot stop to tell you hardly any of the adventures that befell Theseus on the road to Athens. It is enough to say, that he quite cleared that part of the country of the robbers, about whom King Pittheus had been so much alarmed. One of these bad people was named Procrustes; and he was indeed a terrible fellow, and had an ugly way of making fun of the poor travellers who happened to fall into his clutches. In his cavern he had a bed, on which, with great pretence of hospitality, he invited his guests to lie down; but if they happened to be shorter than the bed, this wicked villain stretched them out by main force; or, if they were too tall, he lopped off their heads or feet, and laughed at what he had done, as an excellent joke. Thus, however weary a man might be, he never liked to lie in the bed of Procrustes. Another of these robbers, named Scinis, must likewise have been a very great scoundrel. He was in the habit of flinging his victims off a high cliff into the sea; and, in order to give him exactly his deserts, Theseus tossed him off the very same place. But, if you will believe me, the sea would not pollute itself by receiving such a bad person into its bosom; neither would the earth, having once got rid of him, consent to take him back; so that, between the cliff and the sea, Scinis stuck fast in the air, which was forced to bear the burden of his naughtiness.

After these memorable deeds, Theseus heard of an enormous sow, which ran wild, and was the terror of all the farmers round about; and, as he did not consider himself above doing any good thing that came in his way, he killed this monstrous creature, and gave the carcass to the poor people for bacon. The great sow had been an awful beast, while ramping about the woods and fields, but was a pleasant object enough when cut up into joints, and smoking on I know not how many dinner tables.

Thus, by the time he reached his journey's end Theseus had done many valiant feats with his father's golden-hilted sword, and had gained the renown of being one of the bravest young men of the day. His fame travelled faster than he did, and reached Athens before him. As he entered the city, he heard the inhabitants talking at the street comers and saying that Hercules was brave, and Jason too, and Castor and Pollux likewise, but that Theseus, the son of their own king, would turn out as great a hero as the best of them. Theseus took longer strides on hearing this, and fancied himself sure of a magnificent reception at his father's court, since he came thither with Fame to blow her trumpet before him, and cry to King Ægeus, "Behold your son!"

He little suspected, innocent youth that he was, that here in this very Athens, where his father reigned, a greater danger awaited him than any

which he had encountered on the road. Yet this was the truth. You must understand that the father of Theseus, though not very old in years, was almost worn out with the cares of government, and had thus grown aged before his time. His nephews, not expecting him to live a very great while, intended to get all the power of the kingdom into their own hands. But when they heard that Theseus had arrived in Athens, and learned what a gallant young man he was, they saw that he would not be at all the kind of person to let them steal away his father's crown and scepter, which ought to be his own by right of inheritance. Thus these bad-hearted nephews of King Ægeus, who were the own cousins of Theseus, at once became his enemies. A still more dangerous enemy was Medea, the wicked enchantress; for she was now the king's wife, and wanted to give the kingdom to her son Medus, instead of letting it be given to the son of Æthra, whom she hated.

It so happened that the king's nephews met Theseus, and found out who he was, just as he reached the entrance of the royal palace. With all their evil designs against him, they pretended to be their cousin's best friends and expressed great joy at making his acquaintance. They proposed to him that he should come into the king's presence as a stranger, in order to try whether Ægeus would discover in the young man's features any likeness either to himself or his mother Æthra, and thus recognize him for a son. Theseus consented; for he fancied that his father would know him in a moment, by the love that was in his heart. But, while he waited at the door, the nephews ran and told King Ægeus that a young man had arrived in Athens, who, to their certain knowledge intended to put him to death, and get possession of his royal crown.

"And he is now waiting for admission to your majesty's presence," added they.

"Aha!" cried the old king, on hearing this. "Why, he must be a very wicked young fellow indeed! Pray, what would you advise me to do with him?"

In reply to this question, the wicked Medea put in her word. As I have already told you, she was a famous enchantress. According to some stories, she was in the habit of boiling old people in a large caldron, under pretence of making them young again; but King Ægeus, I suppose, did not fancy such an uncomfortable way of growing young, or perhaps was contented to be old, and therefore would never let himself be popped into the caldron. If there were time to spare from more important matters, I should be glad to tell you of Medea's fiery chariot, drawn by winged dragons, in which the enchantress used often to take an airing among the clouds. This chariot, in fact, was the vehicle that first brought her to Athens, where she had done nothing but mischief ever since her arrival. But these and many other wonders must be left untold; and it is enough to say that Medea, amongst a thousand other bad things, knew how to prepare a poison that was instantly fatal to whomsoever might so much as touch it

with his lips.

So when the king asked what he should do with Theseus, this naughty woman had an answer ready at her tongue's end.

"Leave that to me, please your majesty," she replied. "Only admit this evil-minded young man to your presence, treat him civilly, and invite him to drink a goblet of wine. Your majesty is well aware that I sometimes amuse myself with distilling very powerful medicines. Here is one of them in this small phial. As to what it is made of, that is one of my secrets of state. Do but let me put a single drop into the goblet and let the young man taste it, and I shall answer for it, he shall quite lay aside the bad designs with which he comes hither."

As she said this, Medea smiled; but, for all her smiling face, she meant nothing less than to poison the poor innocent Theseus, before his father's eyes. And King Ægeus, like most other kings, thought any punishment mild enough for a person who was accused of plotting against his life. He therefore made little or no objection to Medea's scheme, and as soon as the poisonous wine was ready, gave orders that the young stranger should be admitted into his presence. The goblet was set on a table beside the king's throne; and a fly, meaning just to sip a little from the brim, immediately tumbled into it, dead. Observing this, Medea looked round at the nephews and smiled again.

When Theseus was ushered into the royal apartment, the only object that he seemed to behold was the white-bearded old king. There he sat on his magnificent throne, a dazzling crown on his head, and a scepter in his hand. His aspect was stately and majestic, although his years and infirmities weighed heavily upon him, as if each year were a lump of lead, and each infirmity a ponderous stone, and all were bundled up together, and laid upon his weary shoulders. The tears both of joy and sorrow sprang into the young man's eyes; for he thought how sad it was to see his dear father so infirm, and how sweet it would be to support him with his own youthful strength, and to cheer him up with the alacrity of his loving spirit. When a son takes his father into his warm heart, it renews the old man's youth in a better way than by the heat of Medea's magic caldron. And this was what Theseus resolved to do. He could scarcely wait to see whether King Ægeus would recognize him, so eager was he to throw himself into his arms.

Advancing to the foot of the throne, he attempted to make a little speech, which he had been thinking about, as he came up the stairs. But he was almost choked by a great many tender feelings that gushed out of his heart and swelled into his throat, all struggling to find utterance together. And therefore, unless he could have laid his full, over-brimming heart into the king's hand, poor Theseus knew not what to do or say. The cunning Medea observed what was passing in the young man's mind. She was more wicked at that moment than ever she had been before;

for (and it makes me tremble to tell you of it) she did her worst to turn all this unspeakable love with which Theseus was agitated, to his own ruin and destruction.

“Does your majesty see his confusion?” she whispered in the king’s ear. “He is so conscious of guilt, that he trembles and cannot speak. The wretch lives too long! Quick! offer him the wine!”

Now King Ægeus had been gazing earnestly at the young stranger, as he drew near the throne. There was something, he knew not what, either in his white brow, or in the fine expression of his mouth, or in his beautiful and tender eyes, that made him indistinctly feel as if he had seen this youth before; as if, indeed, he had trotted him on his knee when a baby, and had beheld him growing to be a stalwart man, while he himself grew old. But Medea guessed how the king felt, and would not suffer him to yield to these natural sensibilities; although they were the voice of his deepest heart, telling him, as plainly as it could speak, that here was our dear son, and Æthra’s son, coming to claim him for a father. The enchantress again whispered in the king’s ear, and compelled him, by her witchcraft, to see everything under a false aspect.

He made up his mind, therefore, to let Theseus drink off the poisoned wine.

“Young man,” said he, “you are welcome! I am proud to show hospitality to so heroic a youth. Do me the favor to drink the contents of this goblet. It is brimming over, as you see, with delicious wine, such as I bestow only on those who are worthy of it! None is more worthy to quaff it than yourself!”

So saying, King Ægeus took the golden goblet from the table, and was about to offer it to Theseus. But, partly through his infirmities, and partly because it seemed so sad a thing to take away this young man’s life, however wicked he might be, and partly, no doubt, because his heart was wiser than his head, and quaked within him at the thought of what he was going to do—for all these reasons, the king’s hand trembled so much that a great deal of the wine slopped over. In order to strengthen his purpose, and fearing lest the whole of the precious poison should be wasted, one of his nephews now whispered to him—

“Has your majesty any doubt of this stranger’s guilt? There is the very sword with which he meant to slay you. How sharp, and bright, and terrible it is. Quick!—let him taste the wine; or perhaps he may do the deed even yet.”

At these words, Ægeus drove every thought and feeling out of his breast, except the one idea how justly the young man deserved to be put to death. He sat erect on his throne, and held out the goblet of wine with a steady hand, and bent on Theseus a frown of kingly severity; for, after all,

he had too noble a spirit to murder even a treacherous enemy with a deceitful smile upon his face.

“Drink!” said he, in the stern tone with which he was wont to condemn a criminal to be beheaded. “You have well deserved of me such wine as this!”

Theseus held out his hand to take the wine. But, before he touched it, King Ægeus trembled again. His eyes had fallen on the gold-hilted sword that hung at the young man’s side. He drew back the goblet.

“That sword!” he exclaimed; “how came you by it?”

“It was my father’s sword,” replied Theseus, with a tremulous voice. “These were his sandals. My dear mother (her name is Æthra) told me his story while I was yet a little child. But it is only a month since I grew strong enough to lift the heavy stone, and take the sword and sandals from beneath it, and come to Athens to seek my father.”

“My son! my son!” cried King Ægeus, flinging away the fatal goblet, and tottering down from the throne to fall into the arms of Theseus. “Yes, these are Æthra’s eyes. It is my son.”

I have quite forgotten what became of the king’s nephews. But when the wicked Medea saw this new turn of affairs, she hurried out of the room, and going to her private chamber, lost no time in setting her enchantments at work. In a few moments she heard a great noise of hissing snakes outside of the chamber window; and, behold! there was her fiery chariot, and four huge winged serpents, wriggling and twisting in the air, flourishing their tails higher than the top of the palace, and all ready to set off on an aerial journey. Medea stayed only long enough to take her son with her, and to steal the crown jewels, together with the king’s best robes, and whatever other valuable things she could lay her hands on; and getting into the chariot, she whipped up the snakes, and ascended high over the city.

The king, hearing the hiss of the serpents, scrambled as fast as he could to the window, and bawled out to the abominable enchantress never to come back. The whole people of Athens, too, who had run out of doors to see this wonderful spectacle, set up a shout of joy at the prospect of getting rid of her. Medea, almost bursting with rage, uttered precisely such a hiss as one of her own snakes, only ten times more venomous and spiteful; and glaring fiercely out of the blaze of the chariot, she shook her hands over the multitude below, as if she were scattering a million of curses among them. In so doing, however, she unintentionally let fall about five hundred diamonds of the first water, together with a thousand great pearls, and two thousand emeralds, rubies, sapphires, opals, and topazes, to which she had helped herself out of the king’s strong-box. All these came pelting down, like a shower of many-colored hailstones, upon the heads of grown people and children, who forthwith gathered them

up, and carried them back to the palace. But King Ægeus told them that they were welcome to the whole, and to twice as many more, if he had them, for the sake of his delight at finding his son, and losing the wicked Medea. And, indeed, if you had seen how hateful was her last look, as the flaming chariot flew upward, you would not have wondered that both king and people should think her departure a good riddance.

And now Prince Theseus was taken into great favor by his royal father. The old king was never weary of having him sit beside him on his throne, (which was quite wide enough for two), and of hearing him tell about his dear mother, and his childhood, and his many boyish efforts to lift the ponderous stone. Theseus, however, was much too brave and active a young man to be willing to spend all his time in relating things which had already happened. His ambition was to perform other and more heroic deeds, which should be better worth telling in prose and verse. Nor had he been long in Athens before he caught and chained a terrible mad bull, and made a public show of him, greatly to the wonder and admiration of good King Ægeus and his subjects. But pretty soon he undertook an affair that made all his foregone adventures seem like mere boy's play. The occasion of it was as follows:—

One morning, when Prince Theseus awoke, he fancied that he must have had a very sorrowful dream, and that it was still running in his mind, even now that his eyes were open. For it appeared as if the air was full of a melancholy wail; and when he listened more attentively, he could hear sobs, and groans, and screams of woe, mingled with deep, quiet sighs, which came from the king's palace, and from the streets, and from the temples, and from every habitation in the city. And all these mournful noises, issuing out of thousands of separate hearts, united themselves into the one great sound of affliction, which had startled Theseus from slumber. He put on his clothes as quickly as he could (not forgetting his sandals and gold-hilted sword), and hastening to the king, inquired what it all meant.

“Alas! my son,” quoth King Ægeus, heaving a long sigh, “here is a very lamentable matter in hand. This is the woefulest anniversary in the whole year. It is the day when we annually draw lots to see which of the youths and maidens of Athens shall go to be devoured by the horrible Minotaur!”

“The Minotaur!” exclaimed Prince Theseus; and like a brave young prince as he was, he put his hand to the hilt of his sword. “What kind of a monster may that be? Is it not possible, at the risk of one's life, to slay him?”

But King Ægeus shook his venerable head, and to convince Theseus that it was quite a hopeless case, he gave him an explanation of the whole affair. It seems that in the island of Crete there lived a certain dreadful monster, called a Minotaur, which was shaped partly like a man and partly like a bull, and was altogether such a hideous sort of

a creature that it is really disagreeable to think of him. If he were suffered to exist at all, it should have been on some desert island, or in the duskiness of some deep cavern, where nobody would ever be tormented by his abominable aspect. But King Minos, who reigned over Crete, laid out a vast deal of money in building a habitation for the Minotaur, and took great care of his health and comfort, merely for mischief's sake. A few years before this time, there had been a war between the city of Athens and the island of Crete, in which the Athenians were beaten and compelled to beg for peace. No peace could they obtain, however, except on condition that they should send seven young men and seven maidens, every year, to be devoured by the pet monster of the cruel King Minos. For three years past, this grievous calamity had been borne. And the sobs, and groans, and shrieks, with which the city was now filled, were caused by the people's woe, because the fatal day had come again, when the fourteen victims were to be chosen by lot, and the old people feared lest their sons or daughters might be taken, and the youths and damsels dreaded lest they themselves might be destined to glut the ravenous maw of that detestable man-brute.

But when Theseus heard the story, he straightened himself up, so that he seemed taller than ever before; and as for his face, it was indignant, spiteful, bold, tender, and compassionate, all in one look.

"Let the people of Athens, this year, draw lots for only six young men, instead of seven," said he. "I will myself be the seventh; and let the Minotaur devour me, if he can!"

"O my dear son," cried King Ægeus, "why should you expose yourself to this horrible fate? You are a royal prince, and have a right to hold yourself above the destinies of common men."

"It is because I am a prince, your son, and the rightful heir of your kingdom, that I freely take upon me the calamity of your subjects," answered Theseus. "And you, my father, being king over this people, and answerable to heaven for their welfare, are bound to sacrifice what is dearest to you, rather than that the son or daughter of the poorest citizen should come to any harm."

The old king shed tears, and besought Theseus not to leave him desolate in his old age, more especially as he had but just begun to know the happiness of possessing a good and valiant son. Theseus, however, felt that he was in the right, and therefore would not give up his resolution. But he assured his father that he did not intend to be eaten up, unresistingly, like a sheep, and that, if the Minotaur devoured him, it should not be without a battle for his dinner. And finally, since he could not help it, King Ægeus consented to let him go. So a vessel was got ready, and rigged with black sails; and Theseus, with six other young men, and seven tender and beautiful damsels, came down to the harbor to embark. A sorrowful multitude accompanied them to the shore. There was

the poor old king, too, leaning on his son's arm, and looking as if his single heart held all the grief of Athens.

Just as Prince Theseus was going on board, his father bethought himself of one last word to say.

"My beloved son," said he, grasping the prince's hand, "you observe that the sails of this vessel are black; as indeed they ought to be, since it goes upon a voyage of sorrow and despair. Now, being weighed down with infirmities, I know not whether I can survive till the vessel shall return. But, as long as I do live, I shall creep daily to the top of yonder cliff, to watch if there be a sail upon the sea. And, dearest Theseus, if, by some happy chance, you should escape the jaws of the Minotaur, then tear down those dismal sails, and hoist others that shall be bright as the sunshine. Beholding them on the horizon, myself and all the people will know that you are coming back victorious, and will welcome you with such a festal uproar as Athens never heard before."

Theseus promised that he would do so. Then, going on board, the mariners trimmed the vessel's black sails to the wind, which blew faintly off the shore, being pretty much made up of the sighs that everybody kept pouring forth on this melancholy occasion. But by-and-by, when they had got fairly out to sea, there came a stiff breeze from the north-west, and drove them along as merrily over the white-capped waves as if they had been going on the most delightful errand imaginable. And though it was a sad business enough, I rather question whether fourteen young people, without any old persons to keep them in order, could continue to spend the whole time of the voyage in being miserable. There had been some few dances upon the undulating deck, I suspect, and some hearty bursts of laughter, and other such unseasonable merriment among the victims, before the high blue mountains of Crete began to show themselves among the far-off clouds. That sight, to be sure, made them all very grave again.

Theseus stood among the sailors gazing eagerly towards the land; although, as yet, it seemed hardly more substantial than the clouds, amidst which the mountains were looming up. Once or twice he fancied that he saw a glare of some bright object, a long way off, flinging a gleam across the waves. "Did you see that flash of light?" he inquired of the master of the vessel.

"No, prince; but I have seen it before," answered the master. "It came from Talus, I suppose."

As the breeze came fresher just then, the master was busy with trimming his sails, and had no more time to answer questions. But while the vessel flew faster and faster towards Crete, Theseus was astonished to behold a human figure, gigantic in size, which appeared to be striding, with a measured movement, along the margin of the island. It stepped from cliff to cliff, and sometimes from one headland to another, while the

sea foamed and thundered on the shore beneath, and dashed its jets of spray over the giant's feet. What was still more remarkable, whenever the sun shone on this huge figure, it flickered and glimmered; its vast countenance, too, had a metallic luster, and threw great flashes of splendor through the air. The folds of its garments, moreover, instead of waving in the wind, fell heavily over its limbs, as if woven of some kind of metal.

The nigher the vessel came, the more Theseus wondered what this immense giant could be, and whether it actually had life or no. For, though it walked, and made other life-like motions, there yet was a kind of jerk in its gait, which, together with its brazen aspect, caused the young prince to suspect that it was no true giant, but only a wonderful piece of machinery. The figure looked all the more terrible because it carried an enormous brass club on its shoulder.

"What is this wonder?" Theseus asked of the master of the vessel, who was now at leisure to answer him.

"It is Talus, the Man of Brass," said the master.

"And is he a live giant, or a brazen image?" asked Theseus.

"That, truly," replied the master, "is the point which has always perplexed me. Some say, indeed, that this Talus was hammered out for King Minos by Vulcan himself, the skilfulest of all workers in metal. But who ever saw a brazen image that had sense enough to walk round an island three times a day, as this giant walks round the island of Crete, challenging every vessel that comes nigh the shore? And, on the other hand, what living thing, unless his sinews were made of brass, would not be weary of marching eighteen hundred miles in the twenty-four hours, as Talus does, without ever sitting down to rest? He is a puzzler, take him how you will."

Still the vessel went bounding onward; and now Theseus could hear the brazen clangor of the giant's footsteps, as he trod heavily upon the sea-beaten rocks, some of which were seen to crack and crumble into the foamy waves beneath his weight. As they approached the entrance of the port the giant straddled clear across it, with a foot firmly planted on each headland, and uplifting his club to such a height that its butt-end was hidden in a cloud, he stood in that formidable posture, with the sun gleaming all over his metallic surface. There seemed nothing else to be expected but that, the next moment, he would fetch his great club down, slam bang, and smash the vessel into a thousand pieces, without heeding how many innocent people he might destroy; for there is seldom any mercy in a giant, you know, and quite as little in a piece of brass clockwork. But just when Theseus and his companions thought the blow was coming, the brazen lips unclosed themselves, and the figure spoke.

“Whence come you, strangers?”

And when the ringing voice ceased, there was just such a reverberation as you may have heard within a great church bell, for a moment or two after the stroke of the hammer.

“From Athens!” shouted the master in reply.

“On what errand?” thundered the Man of Brass.

And he whirled his club aloft more threateningly than ever, as if he were about to smite them with a thunderstroke right amidships, because Athens, so little while ago, had been at war with Crete.

“We bring the seven youths and the seven maidens,” answered the master, “to be devoured by the Minotaur!”

“Pass!” cried the brazen giant.

That one loud word rolled all about the sky, while again there was a booming reverberation within the figure’s breast. The vessel glided between the headlands of the port, and the giant resumed his march. In a few moments, this wondrous sentinel was far away, flashing in the distant sunshine, and revolving with immense strides around the island of Crete, as it was his never-ceasing task to do.

No sooner had they entered the harbor than a party of the guards of King Minos came down to the water side, and took charge of the fourteen young men and damsels. Surrounded by these armed warriors, Prince Theseus and his companions were led to the king’s palace, and ushered into his presence. Now, Minos was a stern and pitiless king. If the figure that guarded Crete was made of brass, then the monarch, who ruled over it, might be thought to have a still harder metal in his breast, and might have been called a man of iron. He bent his shaggy brows upon the poor Athenian victims. Any other mortal, beholding their fresh and tender beauty, and their innocent looks, would have felt himself sitting on thorns until he had made every soul of them happy, by bidding them go free as the summer wind. But this immitigable Minos cared only to examine whether they were plump enough to satisfy the Minotaur’s appetite. For my part, I wish he himself had been the only victim; and the monster would have found him a pretty tough one.

One after another, King Minos called these pale frightened youths and sobbing maidens to his footstool, gave them each a poke in the ribs with his scepter (to try whether they were in good flesh or no), and dismissed them with a nod to his guards. But when his eyes rested on Theseus, the king looked at him more attentively, because his face was calm and brave.

“Young man,” asked he, with his stern voice, “are you not appalled at the

certainty of being devoured by this terrible Minotaur?”

“I have offered my life in a good cause,” answered Theseus, “and therefore I give it freely and gladly. But thou, King Minos, art thou not thyself appalled, who, year after year, hast perpetrated this dreadful wrong, by giving seven innocent youths and as many maidens to be devoured by a monster? Dost thou not tremble, wicked king, to turn thine eyes inward on thine own heart? Sitting there on thy golden throne, and in thy robes of majesty, I tell thee to thy face, King Minos, thou art a more hideous monster than the Minotaur himself!”

“Aha! do you think me so?” cried the king, laughing in his cruel way. “To-morrow, at breakfast time, you shall have an opportunity of judging which is the greater monster, the Minotaur or the king! Take them away, guards; and let this free-spoken youth be the Minotaur’s first morsel!”

Near the king’s throne (though I had no time to tell you so before) stood his daughter Ariadne. She was a beautiful and tender-hearted maiden, and looked at these poor doomed captives with very different feelings from those of the iron-breasted King Minos. She really wept, indeed, at the idea of how much human happiness would be needlessly thrown away, by giving so many young people, in the first bloom and rose blossom of their lives, to be eaten up by a creature who, no doubt, would have preferred a fat ox, or even a large pig, to the plumpest of them. And when she beheld the brave, spirited figure of Prince Theseus bearing himself so calmly in his terrible peril, she grew a hundred times more pitiful than before. As the guards were taking him away, she flung herself at the king’s feet, and besought him to set all the captives free, and especially this one young man.

“Peace, foolish girl!” answered King Minos. “What hast thou to do with an affair like this? It is a matter of state policy, and therefore quite beyond thy weak comprehension. Go water thy flowers, and think no more of these Athenian caitiffs, whom the Minotaur shall as certainly eat up for breakfast as I will eat a partridge for my supper.”

So saying, the king looked cruel enough to devour Theseus and all the rest of the captives, himself, had there been no Minotaur to save him the trouble. As he would hear not another word in their favor, the prisoners were now led away, and clapped into a dungeon, where the jailer advised to go to sleep as soon as possible, because the Minotaur was in the habit of calling for breakfast early. The seven maidens and six of the young men soon sobbed themselves to slumber. But Theseus was not like them. He felt conscious that he was wiser, and braver, and stronger than his companions, and that therefore he had the responsibility of all their lives upon him, and must consider whether there was no way to save them, even in this last extremity. So he kept himself awake, and paced to and fro across the gloomy dungeon in which they were shut up.

Just before midnight, the door was softly unbarred, and the gentle Ariadne showed herself, with a torch in her hand.

“Are you awake, Prince Theseus?” she whispered.

“Yes,” answered Theseus. “With so little time to live, I do not choose to waste any of it in sleep.”

“Then follow me,” said Ariadne, “and tread softly.”

What had become of the jailer and the guards, Theseus never knew. But, however that might be, Ariadne opened all the doors, and led him forth from the darksome prison into the pleasant moonlight.

“Theseus,” said the maiden, “you can now get on board your vessel, and sail away for Athens.”

“No,” answered the young man; “I will never leave Crete unless I can first slay the Minotaur, and save my poor companions, and deliver Athens from this cruel tribute.”

“I knew that this would be your resolution,” said Ariadne. “Come, then, with me, brave Theseus. Here is your own sword, which the guards deprived you of. You will need it; and pray Heaven you may use it well.”

Then she led Theseus along by the hand until they came to a dark, shadowy grove, where the moonlight wasted itself on the tops of the trees, without shedding hardly so much as a glimmering beam upon their pathway. After going a good way through this obscurity, they reached a high marble wall, which was overgrown with creeping plants, that made it shaggy with their verdure. The wall seemed to have no door, nor any windows, but rose up, lofty, and massive, and mysterious, and was neither to be clambered over, nor, so far as Theseus could perceive, to be passed through. Nevertheless, Ariadne did but press one of her soft little fingers against a particular block of marble, and, though it looked as solid as any other part of the wall, it yielded to her touch, disclosing an entrance just wide enough to admit them. They crept through, and the marble stone swung back into its place.

“We are now,” said Ariadne, “in the famous labyrinth which Dædalus built before he made himself a pair of wings, and flew away from our island like a bird. That Dædalus was a very cunning workman; but of all his artful contrivances, this labyrinth is the most wondrous. Were we to take but a few steps from the doorway, we might wander about all our lifetime, and never find it again. Yet in the very center of this labyrinth is the Minotaur and, Theseus, you must go thither to seek him.”

“But how shall I ever find him,” asked Theseus, “if the labyrinth so bewilders me as you say it will?”

Just as he spoke, they heard a rough and very disagreeable roar, which greatly resembled the lowing of a fierce bull, but yet had some sort of sound like the human voice. Theseus even fancied a rude articulation in it, as if the creature that uttered it were trying to shape his hoarse breath into words. It was at some distance, however, and he really could not tell whether it sounded most like a bull's roar or a man's harsh voice.

"That is the Minotaur's noise," whispered Ariadne, closely grasping the hand of Theseus, and pressing one of her own hands to her heart, which was all in a tremble. "You must follow that sound through the windings of the labyrinth, and, by and by, you will find him. Stay! take the end of this silken string, I will hold the other end; and then, if you win the victory, it will lead you again to this spot. Farewell, brave Theseus."

So the young man took the end of the silken string in his left hand, and his gold-hilted sword, ready drawn from its scabbard, in the other, and trod boldly into the inscrutable labyrinth. How this labyrinth was built is more than I can tell you, but so cunningly contrived a mizmaze was never seen in the world, before nor since. There can be nothing else so intricate, unless it were the brain of a man like Dædalus, who planned it, or the heart of any ordinary man; which last, to be sure, is ten times as great a mystery as the labyrinth of Crete. Theseus had not taken five steps before he lost sight of Ariadne and in five more his head was growing dizzy. But still he went on, now creeping through a low arch, now ascending a flight of steps, now in one crooked passage, and now in another, with here a door opening before him, and there one hanging behind, until it really seemed as if the walls spun round, and whirled him round along with them. And all the while, through these hollow avenues, now nearer, now farther off again, resounded the cry of the Minotaur; and the sound was so fierce, so cruel, so ugly, so like a bull's roar, and withal so like a human voice, and yet like neither of them, that the brave heart of Theseus grew sterner and angrier at every step; for he felt it an insult to the moon and sky, and to our affectionate and simple Mother Earth, that such a monster should have the audacity to exist.

As he passed onward, the clouds gathered over the moon, and the labyrinth grew so dusky that Theseus could no longer discern the bewilderment through which he was passing. He would have felt quite lost, and utterly hopeless of ever again walking in a straight path, if, every little while, he had not been conscious of a gentle twitch at the silken cord. Then he knew that the tender-hearted Ariadne was still holding the other end, and that she was fearing for him, and hoping for him, and giving him just as much of her sympathy as if she were close by his side. Oh, indeed, I can assure you, there, was a vast deal of human sympathy running along that slender thread of silk. But still he followed the dreadful roar of the Minotaur, which now grew louder and louder, and

finally so very loud that Theseus fully expected to come close upon him, at every new zigzag and wriggle of the path. And at last, in an open space, at the very center of the labyrinth, he did discern the hideous creature.

Sure enough, what an ugly monster it was! Only his horned head belonged to a bull; and yet, somehow or other, he looked like a bull all over, preposterously waddling on his hind legs; or, if you happened to view him in another way, he seemed wholly a man, and all the more monstrous for being so. And there he was, the wretched thing, with no society, no companion, no kind of a mate, living only to do mischief, and incapable of knowing what affection means. Theseus hated him, and shuddered at him, and yet could not but be sensible of some sort of pity; and all the more, the uglier and more detestable the creature was. For he kept striding to and fro, in a solitary frenzy of rage, continually emitting a hoarse roar, which was oddly mixed up with half-shaped words; and, after listening a while, Theseus understood that the Minotaur was saying to himself how miserable he was, and how hungry, and how he hated everybody, and how he longed to eat up the human race alive.

Ah, the bull-headed villain! And oh, my good little people, you will perhaps see, one of these days, as I do now, that every human being who suffers anything evil to get into his nature, or to remain there, is a kind of Minotaur, an enemy of his fellow-creatures, and separated from all good companionship, as this poor monster was.

Was Theseus afraid? By no means, my dear auditors. What! a hero like Theseus afraid! Not had the Minotaur had twenty bull heads instead of one. Bold as he was, however, I rather fancy that it strengthened his valiant heart, just at this crisis, to feel a tremulous twitch at the silken cord, which he was still holding in his left hand. It was as if Ariadne were giving him all her might and courage; and, much as he already had, and little as she had to give, it made his own seem twice as much. And to confess the honest truth, he needed the whole, for now the Minotaur, turning suddenly about, caught sight of Theseus, and instantly lowered his horribly sharp horns, exactly as a mad bull does when he means to rush against an enemy. At the same time, he belched forth a tremendous roar, in which there was something like the words of human language, but all disjointed and shaken to pieces by passing through the gullet of a miserably enraged brute.

Theseus could only guess what the creature intended to say, and that rather by his gestures than his words, for the Minotaur's horns were sharper than his wits, and of a great deal more service to him than his tongue. But probably this was the sense of what he uttered:

“Ah, wretch of a human being! I'll stick my horns through you, and toss you fifty feet high, and eat you up the moment you come down.”

“Come on, then, and try it!” was all that Theseus deigned to reply; for he was far too magnanimous to assault his enemy with insolent language.

Without more words on either side, there ensued the most awful fight between Theseus and the Minotaur that ever happened beneath the sun or moon. I really know not how it might have turned out, if the monster, in his first headlong rush against Theseus, had not missed him, by a hair’s breadth, and broken one of his horns short off against the stone wall. On this mishap he bellowed so intolerably that a part of the labyrinth tumbled down, and all the inhabitants of Crete mistook the noise for an uncommonly heavy thunder-storm. Smarting with the pain, he galloped around the open space in so ridiculous a way that Theseus laughed at it, long afterwards, though not precisely at the moment. After this, the two antagonists stood valiantly up to one another, and fought sword to horn, for a long while. At last, the Minotaur made a run at Theseus, grazed his left side with his horn, and flung him down; and thinking that he had stabbed him to the heart, he cut a great caper in the air, opened his bull mouth from ear to ear, and prepared to snap his head off. But Theseus by this time had leaped up, and caught the monster off his guard. Fetching a sword stroke at him with all his force, he hit him fair upon the neck, and made his bull head skip six yards from his human body, which fell down flat upon the ground.

So now the battle was ended. Immediately the moon shone out as brightly as if all the troubles of the world, and all the wickedness and the ugliness that infest human life, were past and gone forever. And Theseus, as he leaned on his sword taking breath, felt another twitch of the silken cord; for all through the terrible encounter, he had held it fast in his left hand. Eager to let Ariadne know of his success, he followed the guidance of the thread, and soon found himself at the entrance of the labyrinth.

“Thou hast slain the monster,” cried Ariadne, clasping her hands.

“Thanks to thee, dear Ariadne,” answered Theseus, “I return victorious.”

“Then,” said Ariadne, “we must quickly summon thy friends, and get them and thyself on board the vessel before dawn. If morning finds thee here, my father will avenge the Minotaur.”

To make my story short, the poor captives were awakened, and, hardly knowing whether it was not a joyful dream, were told of what Theseus had done, and that they must set sail for Athens before daybreak. Hastening down to the vessel, they all clambered on board, except Prince Theseus, who lingered behind them on the strand, holding Ariadne’s hand clasped in his own.

“Dear maiden,” said he, “thou wilt surely go with us. Thou art too gentle and sweet a child for such an iron-hearted father as King Minos. He

cares no more for thee than a granite rock cares for the little flower that grows in one of its crevices. But my father King Ægeus, and my dear mother, Æthra, and all the fathers and mothers in Athens, and all the sons and daughters too, will love and honor thee as their benefactress. Come with us, then; for King Minos will be very angry when he knows what thou hast done.”

Now, some low-minded people, who pretend to tell the story of Theseus and Ariadne, have the face to say that this royal and honorable maiden did really flee away, under cover of the night, with the young stranger whose life she had preserved. They say, too, that Prince Theseus (who could have died sooner than wrong the meanest creature in the world) ungratefully deserted Ariadne on a solitary island, where the vessel touched on its voyage to Athens. But, had the noble Theseus heard these falsehoods, he would have served their slanderous authors as he served the Minotaur! Here is what Ariadne answered, when the brave Prince of Athens besought her to accompany him:

“No, Theseus,” the maiden said, pressing his hand, and then drawing back a step or two, “I cannot go with you. My father is old, and has nobody but myself to love him. Hard as you think his heart is, it would break to lose me. At first, King Minos will be angry; but he will soon forgive his only child; and, by and by, he will rejoice, I know, that no more youths and maidens must come from Athens to be devoured by the Minotaur. I have saved you, Theseus, as much for my father’s sake as for your own. Farewell! Heaven bless you!”

All this was so true, and so maiden-like, and was spoken with so sweet a dignity, that Theseus would have blushed to urge her any longer. Nothing remained for him, therefore, but to bid Ariadne an affectionate farewell, and to go on board the vessel, and set sail.

In a few moments the white foam was boiling up before their prow, as Prince Theseus and his companions sailed out of the harbor, with a whistling breeze behind them. Talus, the brazen giant, on his never-ceasing sentinel’s march, happened to be approaching that part of the coast; and they saw him, by the glimmering of the moonbeams on his polished surface, while he was yet a great way off. As the figure moved like clockwork, however, and could neither hasten his enormous strides nor retard them, he arrived at the port when they were just beyond the reach of his club. Nevertheless, straddling from headland to headland, as his custom was, Talus attempted to strike a blow at the vessel, and, overreaching himself, tumbled at full length into the sea, which splashed high over his gigantic shape, as when an iceberg turns a somerset. There he lies yet; and whoever desires to enrich himself by means of brass had better go thither with a diving bell, and fish up Talus.

On the homeward voyage, the fourteen youths and damsels were in excellent spirits, as you will easily suppose. They spent most of their

time in dancing, unless when the sidelong breeze made the deck slope too much. In due season, they came within sight of the coast of Attica, which was their native country. But here, I am grieved to tell you, happened a sad misfortune.

You will remember (what Theseus unfortunately forgot) that his father, King Ægeus, had enjoined it upon him to hoist sunshiny sails, instead of black ones, in case he should overcome the Minotaur, and return victorious. In the joy of their success, however, and amidst the sports, dancing, and other merriment, with which these young folks wore away the time, they never once thought whether their sails were black, white, or rainbow colored, and, indeed, left it entirely to the mariners whether they had any sails at all. Thus the vessel returned, like a raven, with the same sable wings that had wafted her away. But poor King Ægeus, day after day, infirm as he was, had clambered to the summit of a cliff that overhung the sea, and there sat watching for Prince Theseus, homeward bound; and no sooner did he behold the fatal blackness of the sails, than he concluded that his dear son, whom he loved so much, and felt so proud of, had been eaten by the Minotaur. He could not bear the thought of living any longer; so, first flinging his crown and scepter into the sea (useless baubles that they were to him now!) King Ægeus merely stooped forward, and fell headlong over the cliff, and was drowned, poor soul, in the waves that foamed at its base!

This was melancholy news for Prince Theseus, who when he stepped ashore, found himself king of all the country, whether he would or no; and such a turn of fortune was enough to make any young man feel very much out of spirits. However, he sent for his dear mother to Athens, and, by taking her advice in matters of state, became a very excellent monarch, and was greatly beloved by his people.

THE HIRED HAND AND "HA'NTS"

By E.O. Laughlin

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The Hired Hand was Johnnie's oracle. His auguries were infallible; from his decisions there was no appeal. The wisdom of experienced age was his, and he always stood willing to impart it to the youngest. No question was too trivial for him to consider, and none too abstruse for him to answer. He did not tell Johnnie to "never mind" or wait until he grew older, but was ever willing to pause in his work to explain things. And his oracular qualifications were genuine. He had traveled--had even been as far as the State Fair; he had read--from Robinson Crusoe to Dick the Dead Shot, and, more than all, he had meditated deeply.

The Hired Hand's name was Eph. Perhaps he had another name, too, but if

so it had become obsolete. Far and wide he was known simply as Eph.

Eph was generally termed "a cur'ous feller," and this characterization applied equally well to his peculiar appearance and his inquiring disposition. In his confirmation nature had evidently sacrificed her love of beauty to a temporary passion for elongation. Length seemed to have been the central thought, the theme, as it were, upon which he had been composed. This effect was heightened by generously broad hands and feet and a contrastingly abbreviated chin. The latter feature caused his countenance to wear in repose a decidedly vacant look, but it was seldom caught reposing, usually having to bear a smirk of some sort.

Eph's position in the Winkle household was as peculiar as his personality. Nominally he was a hired servant, but, in fact, from his own point of view at least, he was Mr. Winkle's private secretary and confidential adviser. He had been on the place "ever sence old Fan was a yearlin'," which was a long while, indeed; and had come to regard himself as indispensable. The Winkles treated him as one of the family, and he reciprocated in truly familiar ways. He sat at the table with them, helped entertain their guests, and often accompanied them to church. In regulating matters on the farm Mr. Winkle proposed, but Eph invariably disposed, in a diplomatic way, of course; and, although his judgment might be based on false logic, the result was generally successful and satisfactory.

With all his good qualities and her attachment to him, however, Mrs. Winkle was not sure that Eph's moral status was quite sound, and she was inclined to discourage Johnnie's association with him. As a matter of fact she had overheard Johnnie utter several bad words, of which Eph was certainly the prime source. But a mother's solicitude was of little avail when compared with Eph's Delphian wisdom. Johnnie would steal away to join Eph in the field at every chance, and the information he acquired at these secret séances, was varied and valuable.

It was Eph who taught him how to tell the time of day by the sun; how to insert a "dutchman" in the place of a lost suspender button; how to make bird-traps; and how to "skin the cat." Eph initiated him into the mysteries of magic and witchcraft, and showed him how to locate a subterranean vein of water by means of a twig of witch-hazel. Eph also confided to Johnnie that he himself could stanch the flow of blood or stop a toothache instantly by force of a certain charm, but he could not tell how to do this because the secret could be imparted only from man to woman, or vice versa. Even the shadowy domain of spirits had not been exempt from Eph's investigations, and he related many a terrifying experience with "ha'nts."

Johnnie was first introduced to the ghost world one summer night, when he and Eph had gone fishing together.

"If ye want to ketch the big uns, always go at night in the dark o' the moon," said Eph, and his piscatorial knowledge was absolute.

They had fished in silence for some time, and Johnnie was nodding, when Eph suddenly whispered:

"Let's go home, sonny, I think I see a ha'nt down yander."

Johnnie had no idea what a "ha'nt" might be, but Eph's constrained manner betokened something dreadful.

It was not until they had come within sight of home that Johnnie ventured to inquire:

"Say, Eph, what is a ha'nt?"

"Huh! What is ha'nts? Why, sonny, you mean to tell me you don't know what ha'nts is?"

"Not exactly; sompin' like wildcats, ain't they?"

"Well, I'll be confounded! Wildcats! Not by a long shot;" and Eph broke into the soft chuckle which always preceded his explanations. They reached the orchard fence, and, seating himself squarely on the topmost rail, Eph began impressively:

"Ha'nts is the remains of dead folks--more 'specially them that's been assassinated, er, that is, kilt--understan'? They're kind o' like sperrits, ye know. After so long a time they take to comin' back to yarth an' ha'ntin' the precise spot where they wuz murdered. They always come after dark, an' the diffrent shapes they take on is supprisin'. I have seed ha'nts that looked like sheep, an' ha'nts that looked like human persons; but lots of 'em ye cain't see a-tall, bein' invisible, as the sayin' is. Now, fer all we know, they may be a ha'nt settin' right here betwixt us, this minute!"

With this solemn declaration Johnnie shivered and began edging closer to Eph, until restrained and appalled by the thought that he might actually sit on the unseen spirit by such movement.

"But do they hurt people, Eph?" he asked anxiously.

Eph gave vent to another chuckle.

"Not if ye understan' the'r ways," he observed sagely. "If ye let 'em alone an' don't go foolin' aroun' the'r ha'ntin'-groun' they'll never harm ye. But don't ye never trifle with no ha'nt, sonny. I knowed a feller't thought 'twuz smart to hector 'em an' said he wuzn't feared. Onct he throwed a rock at one--"

Here Eph paused.

"What h-happened?" gasped Johnnie.

"In one year from that time," replied Eph gruesomely, "that there feller's cow wuz hit by lightnin'; in three year his hoss kicked him an' busted a rib; an' in seven year he wuz a corpse!"

The power of this horrible example was too much for Johnnie.

"Don't you reckon it's bedtime?" he suggested tremblingly.

Thenceforth for many months Johnnie led a haunted life. Ghosts glowered at him from cellar and garret. Specters slunk at his heels, phantoms flitted through the barn. Twilight teemed with horrors, and midnight, when he awoke at that hour, made of his bedroom a veritable Brocken.

It was vain for his parents to expostulate with him. Was one not bound to believe one's own eyes? And how about the testimony of the Hired Hand?

The story in his reader--told in verse and graphically illustrated--of the boy named Walter, who, being alone on a lonesome highway one dark night, beheld a sight that made his blood run cold, acquired an abnormal interest for Johnnie. Walter, with courage resembling madness, marched straight up to the alleged ghost and laughed gleefully to find, "It was a friendly guide-post, his wand'ring steps to guide."

This was all very well, as it turned out, but what if it had been a sure-enough ghost, reflected Johnnie. What if it had reached down with its long, snaky arms and snatched Walter up--and run off with him in the dark--and no telling what? Or it might have swooped straight up in the air with him, for ghosts could do that. Johnnie resolved he would not take any chances with friendly guide-posts which might turn out to be hostile spirits.

Then there was the similar tale of the lame goose, and the one concerning the pillow in the swing--each intended, no doubt, to allay foolish fears on the part of children, but exercising an opposite and harrowing influence upon Johnnie.

DEATH AND ODYSSEUS

In the Olympian courts Love laughed at Death, because he was

unsightly, and because She couldn't help it, and because he never did anything worth doing, and because She would.

And Death hated being laughed at, and used to brood apart thinking only of his wrongs and of what he could do to end this intolerable treatment.

But one day Death appeared in the courts with an air and They all noticed it. "What are you up to now?" said Love. And Death with some solemnity said to Her: "I am going to frighten Odysseus"; and drawing about him his grey traveller's cloak went out through the windy door with his jowl turned earthwards.

And he came soon to Ithaca and the hall that Athene knew, and opened the door and saw there famous Odysseus, with his white locks bending close over the fire, trying to warm his hands.

And the wind through the open door blew bitterly on Odysseus.

And Death came up behind him, and suddenly shouted.

And Odysseus went on warming his pale hands.

Then Death came close and began to mouth at him. And after a while Odysseus turned and spoke. And "Well, old servant," he said, "have your masters been kind to you since I made you work for me round Ilion?"

And Death for some while stood mute, for he thought of the laughter of Love.

Then "Come now," said Odysseus, "lend me your shoulder," and he leaning heavily on that bony joint, they went together through the open door.

DEATH AND THE ORANGE

Two dark young men in a foreign southern land sat at a restaurant table with one woman.

And on the woman's plate was a small orange which had an evil laughter in its heart.

And both of the men would be looking at the woman all the time, and

they ate little and they drank much.

And the woman was smiling equally at each.

Then the small orange that had the laughter in its heart rolled slowly off the plate on to the floor. And the dark young men both sought for it at once, and they met suddenly beneath the table, and soon they were speaking swift words to one another, and a horror and an impotence came over the Reason of each as she sat helpless at the back of the mind, and the heart of the orange laughed and the woman went on smiling; and Death, who was sitting at another table, tête-à-tête with an old man, rose and came over to listen to the quarrel.

Both from The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Fifty-one Tales*, by Lord Dunsany

THE SULLIVAN LOOKING-GLASS.

Project Gutenberg's *Oldtown Fireside Stories*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe

"Aunt Lois," said I, "what was that story about Ruth Sullivan?"

Aunt Lois's quick black eyes gave a surprised flash; and she and my grandmother looked at each other a minute significantly. "Who told you any thing about Ruth Sullivan," she said sharply.

"Nobody. Somebody said _you_ knew something about her," said I.

I was holding a skein of yarn for Aunt Lois; and she went on winding in silence, putting the ball through loops and tangled places.

"Little boys shouldn't ask questions," she concluded at last sententiously. "Little boys that ask too many questions get sent to bed."

I knew that of old, and rather wondered at my own hardihood.

Aunt Lois wound on in silence; but, looking in her face, I could see plainly that I had started an exciting topic.

"I should think," pursued my grandmother in her corner, "that Ruth's case might show you, Lois, that a good many things may happen,--more than you believe."

"Oh, well, mother! Ruth's was a strange case; but I suppose there are ways of accounting for it."

"You believed Ruth, didn't you?"

“Oh, certainly, I believed Ruth! Why shouldn’t I? Ruth was one of my best friends, and as true a girl as lives: there wasn’t any nonsense about Ruth. She was one of the sort,” said Aunt Lois reflectively, “that I’d as soon trust as myself: when she said a thing was so and so, I knew it was so.”

“Then, if you think Ruth’s story was true,” pursued my grandmother, “what’s the reason you are always cavilling at things just ’cause you can’t understand how they came to be so?”

Aunt Lois set her lips firmly, and wound with grim resolve. She was the very impersonation of that obstinate rationalism that grew up at the New-England fireside, close alongside of the most undoubting faith in the supernatural.

“I don’t believe such things,” at last she snapped out, “and I don’t disbelieve them. I just let ’em alone. What do I know about ’em? Ruth tells me a story; and I believe her. I know what she saw beforehand, came true in a most remarkable way. Well, I’m sure I’ve no objection. One thing may be true, or another, for all me; but, just because I believe Ruth Sullivan, I’m not going to believe, right and left, all the stories in Cotton Mather, and all that anybody can hawk up to tell. Not I.”

This whole conversation made me all the more curious to get at the story thus dimly indicated; and so we beset Sam for information.

“So your Aunt Lois wouldn’t tell ye nothin’,” said Sam. “Wanter know, neow! sho!”

“No: she said we must go to bed if we asked her.”

“That ’are’s a way folks has; but, ye see, boys,” said Sam, while a droll confidential expression crossed the lack-lustre dolefulness of his visage, “ye see, I put ye up to it, ’cause Miss Lois is so large and commandin’ in her ways, and so kind o’ up and down in all her doin’s, that I like once and a while to sort o’ gravel her; and I knowed enough to know that that ’are question would git her in a tight place.

“Ye see, yer Aunt Lois was knowin’ to all this ’ere about Ruth, so there wer’n’t no gettin’ away from it; and it’s about as remarkable a providence as any o’ them of Mister Cotton Marther’s ‘Magnilly.’ So if you’ll come up in the barn-chamber this arternoon, where I’ve got a lot o’ flax to hatchel out, I’ll tell ye all about it.”

So that afternoon beheld Sam arranged at full length on a pile of top-tow in the barn-chamber, hatchelling by proxy by putting Harry and myself to the service.

“Wal, now, boys, it’s kind o’ refreshing to see how wal ye take hold,” he observed. “Nothin’ like bein’ industrious while ye’r young: gret sight better now than loafin off, down in them medders.

““In books and work and useful play
Let my fust years be past:
So shall I give for every day
Some good account at last.””

“But, Sam, if we work for you, you must tell us that story about Ruth Sullivan.”

“Lordy massy! yis,--course I will. I’ve had the best kind o’ chances of knowin’ all about that ’are. Wal, you see there was old Ginerall Sullivan, he lived in state and grande’r in the old Sullivan house out to Roxberry. I been to Roxberry, and seen that ’are house o’ Ginerall Sullivan’s. There was one time that I was a consid’able spell lookin’ round in Roxberry, a kind o’ seein’ how things wuz there, and whether or no there mightn’t be some sort o’ providential openin’ or suthin’. I used to stay with Aunt Polly Ginger. She was sister to Mehitable Ginger, Ginerall Sullivan’s housekeeper, and hed the in and out o’ the Sullivan house, and kind o’ kept the run o’ how things went and came in it. Polly she was a kind o’ cousin o’ my mother’s, and allers glad to see me. Fact was, I was putty handy round house; and she used to save up her broken things and sich till I come round in the fall; and then I’d mend ’em up, and put the clock right, and split her up a lot o’ kindlings, and board up the cellar-windows, and kind o’ make her sort o’ comfortable,--she bein’ a lone body, and no man round. As I said, it was sort o’ convenient to hev me; and so I jest got the run o’ things in the Sullivan house pretty much as ef I was one on ’em, Ginerall Sullivan he kept a grand house, I tell you. You see, he cum from the old country, and felt sort o’ lordly and grand; and they used to hev the grettest kind o’ doin’s there to the Sullivan house. Ye ought ter a seen that ’are house,--gret big front hall and gret wide stairs; none o’ your steep kind that breaks a feller’s neck to get up and down, but gret broad stairs with easy risers, so they used to say you could a cantered a pony up that ’are stairway easy as not. Then there was gret wide rooms, and sofys, and curtains, and gret curtained bedsteads that looked sort o’ like fortifications, and pictur’s that was got in Italy and Rome and all them ’are heathen places. Ye see, the Ginerall was a drefful worldly old critter, and was all for the pomps and the vanities. Lordy massy! I wonder what the poor old critter thinks about it all now, when his body’s all gone to dust and ashes in the graveyard, and his soul’s gone to ’tarnity! Wal, that are ain’t none o’ my business; only it shows the vanity o’ riches in a kind o’ strikin’ light, and makes me content that I never hed none.”

“But, Sam, I hope General Sullivan wasn’t a wicked man, _was_ he?”

“Wal, I wouldn’t say he was railly wickeder than the run; but he was one o’ these ’ere high-stepping, big-feeling fellers, that seem to be a hevin’ their portion in this life. Drefful proud he was; and he was pretty much sot on this world, and kep’ a sort o’ court goin’ on round him. Wal, I don’t jedge him nor nobody: folks that hes the world is apt to get sot on it. Don’t none on us do more than middlin’ well.”

“But, Sam, what about Ruth Sullivan?”

“Ruth?--Oh, yis!--Ruth--

“Wal, ye see, the only crook in the old Ginerals’ lot was he didn’t hev no children. Mis’ Sullivan, she was a beautiful woman, as handsome as a pictur’; but she never had but one child; and he was a son who died when he was a baby, and about broke her heart. And then this ’ere Ruth was her sister’s child, that was born about the same time; and, when the boy died, they took Ruth home to sort o’ fill his place, and kind o’ comfort up Mis’ Sullivan. And then Ruth’s father and mother died; and they adopted her for their own, and brought her up.

“Wal, she grew up to be amazin’ handsome. Why, everybody said that she was jest the light and glory of that ’are old Sullivan place, and worth more’n all the pictur’s and the silver and the jewels, and all there was in the house; and she was jest so innercent and sweet, that you never see nothing to beat it. Wal, your Aunt Lois she got acquainted with Ruth one summer when she was up to Old Town a visitin’ at Parson Lothrop’s. Your Aunt Lois was a gal then, and a pretty good-lookin’ one too; and, somehow or other, she took to Ruth, and Ruth took to her. And when Ruth went home, they used to be a writin’ backwards and forads; and I guess the fact was, Ruth thought about as much of your Aunt Lois as she did o’ anybody. Ye see, your aunt was a kind o’ strong up-and-down woman that always knew certain jest what she did know; and Ruth, she was one o’ them gals that seems sort o’ like a stray lamb or a dove that’s sort o’ lost their way in the world, and wants some one to show ’em where to go next. For, ye see, the fact was, the old Ginerals and Madam, they didn’t agree very well. He wa’n’t well pleased that she didn’t have no children; and she was sort o’ jealous o’ him ’cause she got hold o’ some sort of story about how he was to a married somebody else over there in England: so she got sort o’ riled up, jest as wimmen will, the best on ’em; and they was pretty apt to have spats, and one could give t’other as good as they sent; and, by all accounts, they fit putty lively sometimes. And, between the two, Ruth she was sort o’ scared, and fluttered like a dove that didn’t know jest where to settle. Ye see, there she was in; that ’are great wide house, where they was a feastin’ and a prancin’ and a dancin’, and a goin’ on like Ahashuerus and Herodias and all them old Scripture days. There was acomin’ and goin’, and there was gret dinners and gret doin’s, but no love; and, you know, the Scriptur’ says, ’Better is a dinner o’ yarbs, where love is, than a stalled ox, and hatred therewith.’

“Wal, I don’t orter say _hatred_, arter all. I kind o’ reckon, the old Ginerl did the best he could: the fact is, when a woman gits a kink in her head agin a man, the best on us don’t allers do jest the right thing.

“Any way, Ruth, she was sort o’ forlorn, and didn’t seem to take no comfort in the goin’s on. The Ginerl he was mighty fond on her, and proud on her; and there wa’n’t nothin’ too good for Ruth. He was free-handed, the Ginerl wuz. He dressed her up in silks and satins, and she hed a maid to wait on her, and she hed sets o’ pearl and dimond; and Madam Sullivan she thought all the world on her, and kind o’ worshipped the ground she trod on. And yet Ruth was sort o’ lonesome.

“Ye see, Ruth wa’n’t calculated for grande’r. Some folks ain’t.

“Why, that ’are summer she spent out to Old Town, she was jest as chirk and chipper as a wren, a wearin’ her little sun-bunnet, and goin’ a huckle-berryin’ and a black-berryin’ and diggin’ sweet-flag, and gettin cowslops and dandelions; and she hed a word for everybody. And everybody liked Ruth, and wished her well. Wal, she was sent for her health; and she got that, and more too: she got a sweetheart.

“Ye see, there was a Cap’n Oliver a visitin’ at the minister’s that summer,--a nice, handsome young man as ever was. He and Ruth and your Aunt Lois, they was together a good deal; and they was a ramblin’ and a ridin’ and a sailin’: and so Ruth and the Captin went the way o’ all the airth, and fell dead in love with each other. Your Aunt Lois she was knowing to it and all about it, ’cause Ruth she was jest one of them that couldn’t take a step without somebody to talk to.

“Captain Oliver was of a good family in England; and so, when he made bold to ask the old Ginerl for Ruth, he didn’t say him nay: and it was agreed, as they was young, they should wait a year or two. If he and she was of the same mind, he should be free to marry her. Jest right on that, the Captain’s regiment was ordered home, and he had to go; and, the next they heard, it was sent off to India. And poor little Ruth she kind o’ drooped and pined; but she kept true, and wouldn’t have nothin’ to say to nobody that came arter her, for there was lots and cords o’ fellows as did come arter her. Ye see, Ruth had a takin’ way with her; and then she had the name of bein’ a great heiress, and that allers draws fellers, as molasses does flies.

“Wal, then the news came, that Captain Oliver was comin’ home to England, and the ship was took by the Algerenes, and he was gone into slavery there among them heathen Mahomedans and what not.

“Folks seemed to think it was all over with him, and Ruth might jest as well give up fust as last. And the old Ginerl he’d come to think she

might do better; and he kep' a introducin' one and another, and tryin' to marry her off; but Ruth she wouldn't. She used to write sheets and sheets to your Aunt Lois about it; and I think Aunt Lois she kep' her grit up. Your Aunt Lois she'd a stuck by a man to the end o' time eft ben her case; and so she told Ruth.

"Wal, then there was young Jeff Sullivan, the Ginerals nephew, he turned up; and the Ginerals he took a gret fancy to him. He was next heir to the Ginerals; but he'd ben a pretty rackety youngster in his young days,--off to sea, and what not, and sowed a consid'able crop o' wild oats. People said he'd been a pirating off there in South Ameriky. Lordy massy! nobody rightly knew where he hed ben or where he hadn't: all was, he turned up at last all alive, and chipper as a skunk blackbird. Wal, of course he made his court to Ruth; and the Ginerals, he rather backed him up in it; but Ruth she wouldn't have nothin' to say to him. Wal, he come and took up his lodgin' at the Ginerals'; and he was jest as slippery as an eel, and sort o' slid into every thing, that was a goin' on in the house and about it. He was here, and he was there, and he was everywhere, and a havin' his say about this and that; and he got everybody putty much under his thumb. And they used to say, he wound the Ginerals round and round like a skein o' yarn; but he couldn't come it round Ruth.

"Wal, the Ginerals said she shouldn't be forced; and Jeff, he was smooth as satin, and said he'd be willing to wait as long as Jacob did for Rachel. And so there he sot down, a watchin' as patient as a cat at a mouse-hole; 'cause the Ginerals he was thick-set and short-necked, and drank pretty free, and was one o' the sort that might pop off any time.

"Wal, Mis' Sullivan, she beset the Ginerals to make a provision for Ruth; 'cause she told him very sensible, that he'd brought her up in luxury, and that it wa'n't fair not to settle somethin' on her; and so the Ginerals he said he'd make a will, and part the property equally between them. And he says to Jeff, that, if he played his part as a young fellow oughter know how, it would all come to him in the end; 'cause they hadn't heard nothing from Captain Oliver for three or four years, and folks about settled it that he must be dead.

"Wal, the Ginerals he got a letter about an estate that had come to him in England; and he had to go over. Wal, livin' on the next estate, was the very cousin of the Ginerals that he was to a married when they was both young: the lands joined so that the grounds run together. What came between them two nobody knows; but she never married, and there she was. There was high words between the Ginerals and Madam Sullivan about his goin' over. She said there wa'n't no sort o' need on't, and he said there was; and she said she hoped _she_ should be in her grave afore he come back; and he said she might suit herself about that for all him. That 'are was the story that the housekeeper told to Aunt Polly; and Aunt Polly she told me. These 'ere squabbles somehow allers does kind o'

leak out one way or t'other. Anyhow, it was a house divided agin itself at the Ginerl's, when he was a fixin' out for the voyage. There was Ruth a goin' fust to one, and then to t'other, and tryin' all she could to keep peace beteen 'em; and there was this 'ere Master Slick Tongue talkin' this way to one side, and that way to t'other, and the old Ginerl kind o' like a shuttle-cock atween 'em.

"Wal, then, the night afore he sailed, the Ginerl he hed his lawyer up in his library there, a lookin' over all his papers and bonds and things, and a witnessing his will; and Master Jeff was there, as lively as a cricket, a goin' into all affairs, and offerin' to take precious good care while he was gone; and the Ginerl he had his papers and letters out, a sortin' on 'em over, which was to be took to the old country, and which was to be put in a trunk to go back to Lawyer Dennis's office.

"Wal, Abner Ginger, Polly's boy, he that was footman and waiter then at the Ginerl's, he told me, that, about eight o'clock that evening he went up with hot water and lemons and sperits and sich, and he see the gret green table in the library all strewed and covered with piles o' papers; and there was tin boxes a standin' round; and the Ginerl a packin' a trunk, and young Master Jeff, as lively and helpful as a rat that smells cheese. And then the Ginerl he says, 'Abner,' says he, 'can you write your name?'--'I should hope so, Ginerl.' says Abner.--'Wal, then, Abner,' says he, 'this is my last will; and I want you to witness it,' and so Abner he put down his name opposite to a place with a wafer and a seal; and then the Ginerl, he says, 'Abner, you tell Ginger to come here.' That, you see, was his housekeeper, my Aunt Polly's sister, and a likely woman as ever was. And so they had her up, and she put down her name to the will; and then Aunt Polly she was had up (she was drinking tea there that night), and she put down her name. And all of 'em did it with good heart, 'cause it had got about among 'em that the will was to provide for Miss Ruth; for everybody loved Ruth, ye see, and there was consid'ble many stories kind o' goin' the rounds about Master Jeff and his doin's. And they did say he sort o' kep' up the strife atween the Ginerl and my lady, and so they didn't think none too well o' him; and, as he was next o' kin, and Miss Ruth wa'n't none o' the Ginerl's blood (ye see, she was Mis' Sullivan's sister's child), of course there wouldn't nothin' go to Miss Ruth in way o' law, and so that was why the signin' o' that 'are will was so much talked about among 'em."

"Wal, you see, the Ginerl he sailed the next day; and Jeff he staid by to keep watch o' things.

"Wal, the old Ginerl he got over safe; for Miss Sullivan, she had a letter from him all right. When he got away, his conscience sort o' nagged him, and he was minded to be a good husband. At any rate, he wrote a good loving letter to her, and sent his love to Ruth, and sent

over lots o' little keepsakes and things for her, and told her that he left her under good protection, and wanted her to try and make up her mind to marry Jeff, as that would keep the property together.

“Wal, now there couldn't be no sort o' sugar sweeter than Jeff was to them lone wimmen. Jeff was one o' the sort that could be all things to all wimmen. He waited and he tended, and he was as humble as any snake in the grass that ever ye see and the old lady, she clean fell in with him, but Ruth, she seemed to have a regular spite agin him. And she that war as gentle as a lamb, that never had so much as a hard thought of a mortal critter, and wouldn't tread on a worm, she was so set agin Jeff, that she wouldn't so much as touch his hand when she got out o' her kerridge.

“Wal, now comes the strange part o' my story. Ruth was one o' the kind that _hes the gift o' seein'. She was born with a veil over her face! _”

This mysterious piece of physiological information about Ruth was given with a look and air that announced something very profound and awful; and we both took up the inquiry, “Born with a veil over her face? How should _that_ make her see?”

“Wal, boys; how should I know? But the fact _is so_. There's those as is wal known as hes the gift o' seein' what others can't see: they can see through walls and houses; they can see people's hearts; they can see what's to come. They don't know nothin' how 'tis, but this 'ere knowledge comes to 'em: it's a gret gift; and that sort's born with the veil over their faces. Ruth was o' these 'ere. Old Granny Badger she was the knowingest old nuss in all these parts; and she was with Ruth's mother when she was born, and she told Lady Lothrop all about it. Says she, 'You may depend upon it that child 'll have the “second-sight”' says she. Oh, that 'are fact was wal known! Wal, that was the reason why Jeff Sullivan couldn't come it round Ruth tho' he was silkier than a milkweed-pod, and jest about as patient as a spider in his hole a watchin' to get his grip on a fly. Ruth wouldn't argue with him, and she wouldn't flout him; but she jest shut herself up in herself, and kept a lookout on him; but she told your Aunt Lois jest what she thought about him.

“Wal, in about six months, come the news that the Ginerel was dead. He dropped right down in his tracks, dead with apoplexy, as if he had been shot; and Lady Maxwell she writ a long letter to my lady and Ruth. Ye see, he'd got to be Sir Thomas Sullivan over there; and he was a comin' home to take 'em all over to England to live in grande'r. Wal, my Lady Sullivan (she was then, ye see) she took it drefful hard. Ef they'd a been the lovingest couple in the world, she couldn't a took it harder. Aunt Polly, she said it was all 'cause she thought so much of him, that she fit him so. There's women that thinks so much o' their husbands, that they won't let 'em hev no peace o' their life; and I expect it war

so with her, poor soul! Any way, she went right down smack, when she heard he was dead. She was abed, sick, when the news come; and she never spoke nor smiled, jist turned her back to everybody, and kinder wilted and wilted, and was dead in a week. And there was poor little Ruth left all alone in the world, with neither kith nor kin but Jeff.

“Wal, when the funeral was over, and the time app’nted to read the will and settle up matters, there wa’n’t no will to be found nowhere, high nor low.

“Lawyer Dean he flew round like a parched pea on a shovel. He said he thought he could a gone in the darkest night, and put his hand on that ’ere will; but when he went where he thought it was, he found it warn’t there, and he knowed he’d kep’ it under lock and key. What he thought was the will turned out to be an old mortgage. Wal, there was an awful row and a to-do about it, you may be sure. Ruth, she jist said nothin’ good or bad. And her not speakin’ made Jeff a sight more uncomfortable than ef she’d a hed it out with him. He told her it shouldn’t make no sort o’ difference; that he should allers stand ready to give her all he hed, if she’d only take him with it. And when it came to that she only gin him a look, and went out o’ the room.

“Jeff he flared and flounced and talked, and went round and round a rumpussin’ among the papers, but no will was forthcomin’, high or low. Wal, now here comes what’s remarkable. Ruth she told this ’ere, all the particulars, to yer Aunt Lois and Lady Lothrop. She said that the night after the funeral she went up to her chamber. Ruth had the gret front chamber, opposite to Mis’ Sullivan’s. I’ve been in it; it was a monstrous big room, with outlandish furniture in it, that the Ginerall brought over from an old palace out to Italy. And there was a great big lookin’-glass over the dressin’-table, that they said come from Venice, that swung so that you could see the whole room in it. Wal, she was a standin’ front o’ this, jist goin’ to undress herself, a hearin’ the rain drip on the leaves and the wind a wishin’ and whisperin’ in the old elm-trees, and jist a thinkin’ over her lot, and what should she do now, all alone in the world, when of a sudden she felt a kind o’ lightness in her head, and she thought she seemed to see somebody in the glass a movin’. And she looked behind, and there wa’n’t nobody there. Then she looked forward in the glass, and saw a strange big room, that she’d never seen before, with a long painted winder in it; and along side o’ this stood a tall cabinet with a good many drawers in it. And she saw herself, and knew that it was herself, in this room, along with another woman whose back was turned towards her. She saw herself speak to this woman, and p’int to the cabinet. She saw the woman nod her head. She saw herself go to the cabinet, and open the middle drawer, and take out a bundle o’ papers from the very back end on’t. She saw her take out a paper from the middle, and open it, and hold it up; and she knew that there was the missin’ will. Wal, it all overcome her so that she fainted clean away. And her maid found her a lyin’ front o’ the dressin’-table

on the floor.

“She was sick of a fever’ for a week or fortnight a’ter; and your Aunt Lois she was down takin’ care of her; and, as soon as she got able to be moved, she was took out to Lady Lothrop’s. Jeff he was jist as attentive and good as he could be; but she wouldn’t bear him near her room. If he so much as set a foot on the stairs that led to it she’d know it, and got so wild that he hed to be kept from comin’ into the front o’ the house. But he was doin’ his best to buy up good words from everybody. He paid all the servants double; he kept every one in their places, and did so well by ’em all that the gen’l word among ’em was that Miss Ruth couldn’t do better than to marry such a nice, open-handed gentleman.

“Wal, Lady Lothrop she wrote to Lady Maxwell all that hed happened; and Lady Maxwell, she sent over for Ruth to come over and be a companion for her, and said she’d adopt her, and be as a mother to her.

“Wal, then Ruth she went over with some gentlefolks that was goin’ back to England, and offered to see her safe and sound; and so she was set down at Lady Maxwell’s manor. It was a grand place, she said, and such as she never see before,--like them old gentry places in England. And Lady Maxwell she made much of her, and cosseted her up for the sake of what the old General had said about her. And Ruth she told her all her story, and how she believed that the will was to be found somewhere, and that she should be led to see it yet.

“She told her, too, that she felt it in her that Cap’n Oliver wasn’t dead, and that he’d come back yet. And Lady Maxwell she took up for her with might and main, and said she’d stand by her. But then, ye see, so long as there warn’t no will to be found, there warn’t nothin’ to be done. Jeff was the next heir; and he’d got every thing, stock, and lot, and the estate in England into the bargain. And folks was beginnin’ to think putty well of him, as folks allers does when a body is up in the world, and hes houses and lands. Lordy massy! riches allers covers a multitude o’ sins.

“Finally, when Ruth hed ben six months with her, one day Lady Maxwell got to tellin’ her all about her history, and what hed ben atween her and her cousin, when they was young, and how they hed a quarrel and he flung off to Ameriky, and all them things that it don’t do folks no good to remember when it’s all over and can’t be helped. But she was a lone body, and it seemed to do her good to talk about it.

“Finally, she says to Ruth, says she, ‘I’ll show you a room in this house you han’t seen before. It was the room where we hed that quarrel,’ says she; ‘and the last I saw of him was there, till he come back to die,’ says she.

“So she took a gret key out of her bunch; and she led Ruth along a

long passage-way to the other end of the house, and opened on a great library. And the minute Ruth came in, she threw up her hands and gin a great cry. 'Oh!' says she, 'this is the room! and there is the window! and there is the cabinet! and _there in that middle drawer at the back end in a bundle of papers is the will! _

"And Lady Maxwell she said, quite dazed, 'Go look,' says she. And Ruth went, jest as she seed herself do, and opened the drawer, and drew forth from the back part a yellow pile of old letters. And in the middle of those was the will, sure enough. Ruth drew it out, and opened it, and showed it to her.

"Wal, you see that will give Ruth the whole of the Ginerals' property in America, tho' it did leave the English estate to Jeff.

"Wal, the end on't was like a story-book.

"Jeff he made believe be mighty glad. And he said it must a ben that the Ginerals hed got flustered with the sperit and water, and put that 'ere will in among his letters that he was a doin' up to take back to England. For it was in among Lady Maxwell's letters that she writ him when they was young, and that he'd a kep' all these years and was a takin' back to her.

"Wal, Lawyer Dean said he was sure that Jeff made himself quite busy and useful that night, a tyin' up the papers with red tape, and a packin' the Ginerals' trunk; and that, when Jeff gin him his bundle to lock up in his box, he never mistrusted but what he'd got it all right.

"Wal, you see it was jest one of them things that can't be known to the jedgment-day. It might a ben an accident, and then agin it might not; and folks settled it one way or t'other, 'cordin' to their 'pinion o' Jeff; but ye see how 'mazin' handy for him it happened! Why, ef it hadn't ben for the providence I've ben a tellin' about, there it might a lain in them old letters, that Lady Maxwell said she never hed the heart to look over! it never would a turned up in the world."

"Well," said I, "what became of Ruth?" "Oh! Cap'n Oliver he came back all alive, and escaped from the Algerines; and they was married in King's Chapel, and lived in the old Sullivan House, in peace and prosperity. That's jest how the story was; and now Aunt Lois can make what she's a mind ter out on't."

"And what became of Jeff?" "Oh! he started to go over to England, and the ship was wrecked off the Irish coast, and that was the last of him. He never got to his property."

"Good enough for him," said both of us. "Wal, I don't know: 'twas pretty hard on Jeff. Mebbe he did, and mebbe he didn't. I'm glad I

warn't in his shoes, tho'. I'd rather never hed nothin'. This 'ere hastin' to be rich is sich a drefful temptation.

“Wal, now, boys, ye've done a nice lot o' flax, and I guess we'll go up to yer grand'ther's cellar and git a mug o' cyder. Talkin' always gits me dry.”

FEODORA.

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Cobwebs From an Empty Skull*
by Ambrose Bierce

Madame Yonsmit was a decayed gentlewoman who carried on her decomposition in a modest wayside cottage in Thuringia. She was an excellent sample of the Thuringian widow, a species not yet extinct, but trying very hard to become so. The same may be said of the whole genus. Madame Yonsmit was quite young, very comely, cultivated, gracious, and pleasing. Her home was a nest of domestic virtues, but she had a daughter who reflected but little credit upon the nest. Feodora was indeed a "bad egg"--a very wicked and ungrateful egg. You could see she was by her face. The girl had the most vicious countenance--it was repulsive! It was a face in which boldness struggled for the supremacy with cunning, and both were thrashed into subjection by avarice. It was this latter virtue in Feodora which kept her mother from having a taxable income.

Feodora's business was to beg on the highway. It wrung the heart of the honest amiable gentlewoman to have her daughter do this; but the h.a.g. having been reared in luxury, considered labour degrading--which it is--and there was not much to steal in that part of Thuringia. Feodora's mendicity would have provided an ample fund for their support, but unhappily that ingrate would hardly ever fetch home more than two or three shillings at a time. Goodness knows what she did with the rest.

Vainly the good woman pointed out the sin of covetousness; vainly she would stand at the cottage door awaiting the child's return, and begin arguing the point with her the moment she came in sight: the receipts diminished daily until the average was less than tenpence--a sum upon which no born gentlewoman would deign to exist. So it became a matter of some importance to know where Feodora kept her banking account. Madame Yonsmit thought at first she would follow her and see; but although the good lady was as vigorous and sprightly as ever, carrying a crutch more for ornament than use, she abandoned this plan because it did not seem suitable to the dignity of a decayed gentlewoman. She employed a detective.

The foregoing particulars I have from Madame Yonsmit herself; for

those immediately subjoining I am indebted to the detective, a skilful officer named Bowstr.

No sooner had the scraggy old hag communicated her suspicions than the officer knew exactly what to do. He first distributed hand-bills all over the country, stating that a certain person suspected of concealing money had better look sharp. He then went to the Home Secretary, and by not seeking to understate the real difficulties of the case, induced that functionary to offer a reward of a thousand pounds for the arrest of the malefactor. Next he proceeded to a distant town, and took into custody a clergyman who resembled Feodora in respect of wearing shoes. After these formal preliminaries he took up the case with some zeal. He was not at all actuated by a desire to obtain the reward, but by pure love of justice. The thought of securing the girl's private hoard for himself never for a moment entered his head.

He began to make frequent calls at the widow's cottage when Feodora was at home, when, by apparently careless conversation, he would endeavour to draw her out; but he was commonly frustrated by her old beast of a mother, who, when the girl's answers did not suit, would beat her unmercifully. So he took to meeting Feodora on the highway, and giving her coppers carefully marked. For months he kept this up with wonderful self-sacrifice--the girl being a mere uninteresting angel. He met her daily in the roads and forest. His patience never wearied, his vigilance never flagged. Her most careless glances were conscientiously noted, her lightest words treasured up in his memory. Meanwhile (the clergyman having been unjustly acquitted) he arrested everybody he could get his hands on. Matters went on in this way until it was time for the grand _coup_.

The succeeding-particulars I have from the lips of Feodora herself.

When that horrid Bowstr first came to the house Feodora thought he was rather impudent, but said, little about it to her mother--not desiring to have her back broken. She merely avoided him as much as she dared, he was so frightfully ugly. But she managed to endure him until he took to waylaying her on the highway, hanging about her all day, interfering with the customers, and walking home with her at night. Then her dislike deepened into disgust; and but for apprehensions not wholly unconnected with a certain crutch, she would have sent him about his business in short order. More than a thousand million times she told him to be off and leave her alone, but men are such fools--particularly this one.

What made Bowstr exceptionally disagreeable was his shameless habit of making fun of Feodora's mother, whom he declared crazy as a loon. But the maiden bore everything as well as she could, until one day the nasty thing put his arm about her waist and kissed her before her very

face; _then_ she felt--well, it is not clear how she felt, but of one thing she was quite sure: after having such a shame put upon her by this insolent brute, she would never go back under her dear mother's roof--never. She was too proud for _that_, at any rate. So she ran away with Mr. Bowstr, and married him.

The conclusion of this history I learned for myself.

Upon hearing of her daughter's desertion Madame Yonsmit went clean daft. She vowed she could bear betrayal, could endure decay, could stand being a widow, would not repine at being left alone in her old age (whenever she should become old), and could patiently submit to the sharper than a serpent's thanks of having a toothless child generally. But to be a mother-in-law! No, no; that was a plane of degradation to which she positively would _not_ descend. So she employed me to cut her throat. It was the toughest throat I ever cut in all my life.

THE

margenes

BY MIRIAM ALLEN DE FORD

*The tiny, live, straw-colored circles
were mysterious but definitely harmless.
Yet they were directly responsible for
riots, revolution and an atomic war...._*

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There is a small striped smelt called the grunion which has odd egg-laying habits. At high tide, on the second, third, and fourth nights after the full of the moon from March to June, thousands of female grunions ride in on the waves to a beach in southern California near San Diego, dig tail-first into the soft sand, deposit their eggs, then ride back on the wash of the next wave. The whole operation lasts about six seconds.

On the nights when the grunion are running, hordes of people used to come to the beach with baskets and other containers, and with torches to light the scene, and try to catch the elusive little fish in their hands.

They were doing that on an April night in 1960. In the midst of the excitement of the chase, only a few of them noticed that something else was riding the waves in with the grunions.

Among the few who stopped grunion-catching long enough to investigate were a girl named Marge Hickin and a boy named Gene Towanda. They were UCLA students, "going together", who had come down on Saturday from Los Angeles for the fun.

"What on earth do you think these can be, Gene?" Marge asked, holding out on her palms three or four of the little circular, wriggling objects, looking like small-size doughnuts, pale straw in color.

"Never saw anything like them," Gene admitted. "But then my major's psychology, not zoology. They don't seem to bite, anyway. Here let's collect some of them instead of the fish. That dingus of yours will hold water. We can take them to the Marine Biology lab tomorrow and find out what they are."

Marge Hickin and Gene Towanda had started a world-wide economic revolution.

None of the scientists at the university laboratory knew what the little live straw-colored circles were, either. In fact, after a preliminary study they wouldn't say positively whether the creatures were animal or vegetable; they displayed voluntary movement, but they seemed to have no respiratory or digestive organs. They were completely anomalous.

The grunion ran again that night, and Gene and Marge stayed down to help the laboratory assistants gather several hundred of the strange new objects for further study. They were so numerous that they were swamping the fish, and the crowds at the beach began to grumble that their sport was being spoiled.

Next night the grunion stopped running--but the little doughnuts didn't. They never stopped. They came in by hundreds of thousands every night, and those which nobody gathered wriggled their way over the land until some of them even turned up on the highways (where a lot of them were smashed by automobiles), on the streets and sidewalks of La Jolla, and as far north as Oceanside and as far south as downtown San Diego itself.

The things were becoming a pest. There were indignant letters to the

papers, and editorials were written calling on the authorities to do something. Just what to do, nobody knew; the only way to kill the circular little objects from the sea seemed to be to crush them--and they were too abundant for that to be very effective.

Meanwhile, the laboratory kept studying them.

Marge and Gene were interested enough to come down again the next weekend to find out what, if anything, had been discovered. Not much had: but one of the biochemists at the laboratory casually mentioned that chemically the straw-colored circles seemed to be almost pure protein, with some carbohydrates and fats, and that apparently they contained all the essential vitamins.

College student that he was, Gene Towanda immediately swallowed one of the wriggling things down whole, as a joke.

It tickled a little, but that wasn't what caused the delighted amazement on his face.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed. "It's delicious!"

He swallowed another handful.

That was the beginning of the great _margene_ industry.

It was an astute reporter, getting a feature story on the sensational new food find, who gave the creatures their name, in honor of the boy and girl who had first brought the things to the attention of the scientists. He dubbed them margenes, and margenes they remained.

"Dr. O. Y. Willard, director of the laboratory," his story said in part, "thinks the margenes may be the answer to the increasing and alarming problem of malnutrition, especially in undeveloped countries.

"'For decades now,' he said, 'scientists have been worried by the growing gap between world population and world food facilities. Over-farming, climatic changes caused by erosion and deforestation, the encroachment of building areas on agricultural land, and above all the unrestricted growth of population, greatest in the very places where food is becoming scarcest and most expensive, have produced a situation where, if no remedy is found, starvation or semi-starvation may be the fate of half the Earth's people. The ultimate result would be the slow degeneration and death of the entire human race.

"'Many remedies have been suggested,' Dr. Willard commented further. 'They range from compulsory birth control to the production of synthetic food, hydroponics, and the harvesting of plankton from the oceans. Each of these presents almost insuperable difficulties.

"The one ideal solution would be the discovery of some universal food that would be nourishing, very cheap, plentiful, tasty, and that would not violate the taboos of any people anywhere in the world. In the margins we may have discovered that food."

"We don't know where the margins came from," the director went on to say, "and we don't even know yet what they are, biologically speaking. What we do know is that they provide more energy per gram than any other edible product known to man, that everyone who has eaten them is enthusiastic about their taste, that they can be processed and distributed easily and cheaply, and that they are acceptable even to those who have religious or other objections to certain other foods, such as beef, among the Hindus or pork among the Jews and Mohammedans."

"Even vegetarians can eat them," Dr. Willard remarked, "since they are decidedly not animal in nature. Neither, I may add, are they vegetable. They are a hitherto utterly unknown synthesis of chemical elements in living form. Their origin remains undiscovered."

Naturally, there was no thought of feeding people on raw margins. Only a few isolated places in either hemisphere would have found live food agreeable. Experiment showed that the most satisfactory way to prepare them was to boil them alive, like crabs or lobsters. They could then be ground and pressed into cakes, cut into convenient portions. One one-inch-square cube made a nourishing and delicious meal for a sedentary adult, two for a man engaged in hard physical labor.

And they kept coming in from the Pacific Ocean nightly, by the million.

By this time none of them had to be swept off streets or highways. The beach where for nearly a century throngs had gathered for the sport of catching grunion was off bounds now; it was the property of California Margene, Inc., a private corporation heavily subsidized by the Federal Government as an infant industry. The grunions themselves had to find another place to lay their eggs, or die off--nobody cared which. The sand they had used for countless millennia as an incubator was hemmed in by factory buildings and trampled by margene-gatherers. The whole beautiful shore for miles around was devastated; the university had to move its marine biological laboratory elsewhere; La Jolla, once a delightful suburb and tourist attraction, had become a dirty, noisy honkytonk town where processing and cannery workers lived and spent their off-hours; the unique Torrey Pines had been chopped down because they interfered with the erection of a freight airport.

But half the world's people were living on margins.

The sole possession of this wonderful foodstuff gave more power to the United States than had priority in the atomic bomb. Only behind

the Iron Curtain did the product of California Margene, Inc. fail to penetrate. Pravda ran parallel articles on the same day, one claiming that margenes-- brzdichnoya--had first appeared long ago on a beach of the Caspian Sea and had for years formed most of the Russian diet; the other warning the deluded nations receiving free supplies as part of American foreign aid that the margenes had been injected with drugs aimed at making them weak and submissive to the exploitation of the capitalist-imperialists.

There was a dangerous moment at the beginning when the sudden sharp decline in stocks of all other food products threatened another 1929. But with federal aid a financial crash was averted and now a new high level of prosperity had been established. Technological unemployment was brief, and most of the displaced workers were soon retained for jobs in one of the many ramifications of the new margene industry.

Agriculture, of course, underwent a short deep depression, not only in America but all over the world; but it came to an end as food other than margenes quickly became a luxury product. Farmers were able to cut their production to a small fraction of the former yield, and to get rich on the dizzying prices offered for bread, apples, or potatoes. And this increased the prosperity of the baking and other related industries as well.

In fact, ordinary food costs (which meant margene costs) were so low that a number of the larger unions voluntarily asked for wage decreases in their next contracts. California Margene, Inc. was able to process, pack, and distribute margene cakes at an infinitesimal retail price, by reason of the magnitude of the output.

An era of political good feeling fell upon the western world, reflected from the well-fed comfort of vast populations whose members never before in their lives had had quite enough to eat. The fear of famine seemed to be over forever, and with it the fear of the diseases and the social unrest that follow famine. Even the U.S.S.R. and its satellites, in a conciliatory move in the United Nations Assembly, suggested that the long cold war ought to be amenable to a reasonable solution through a series of amicable discussions. The western nations, assenting, guessed shrewdly that the Iron Curtain countries "wanted in" on the margenes.

Marge Hickin and Gene Towanda, who had started it all, left college for copywriting jobs with the agency handling the enormous margene publicity; they were married a few months later.

And the margenes continued to come in from the sea in countless millions. They were being harvested now from the Pacific itself, near the shoreline, before they reached the beach. Still no research could discover their original source.

Only a few scientists worried about what would happen if the margenes should disappear as suddenly as they had arrived. Attempts at breeding the creatures had failed completely. They did not undergo fission, they did not sporulate, they seemed to have no sex. No methods of reproduction known in the plant or animal kingdom seemed to apply to them. Hundreds of them were kept alive for long periods--they lived with equal ease in either air or water, and they did not take nourishment, unless they absorbed it from their environment--but no sign of fertility ever appeared. Neither did they seem to die of natural causes. They just kept coming in....

On the night of May 7, 1969, not a single margene was visible in the ocean or on the beach.

They never came again.

What happened as a result is known to every student of history. The world-wide economic collapse, followed by the fall of the most stable governments, the huge riots that arose from the frantic attempts to get possession of the existing stocks of margene cakes or of the rare luxury items of other edibles, the announcement by the U.S.S.R. that it had known from the beginning the whole thing was a gigantic American hoax in the interests of the imperialistic bloodsuckers, the simultaneous atomic attacks by east and west, the Short War of 1970 that ruined most of what bombs had spared of the Earth, the slow struggle back of the remnant of civilization which is all of existence you and I have ever known--all these were a direct outgrowth of that first appearance of the margenes on the beach near San Diego on an April night in 1960.

Marge and Gene Towanda were divorced soon after they had both lost their jobs. She was killed in the hydrogen blast that wiped out San Diego; he fell in the War of 1970. "Margene" became a dirty word in every language on Earth. What small amount of money and ability can be spared is, as everyone knows, devoted today to a desperate international effort to reach and colonize another habitable planet of the Solar System, if such there be.

* * * * *

As for the margenes, themselves, out of the untold millions that had come, only a few thousand were lucky enough to survive and find their way back to their overcrowded starting-point. In their strange way of communication--as incomprehensible to us as would be their means of nourishment and reproduction, or their constitution itself--they made known to their kin what had happened to them. There is no possibility, in spite of the terrific over-population of their original home and of the others to which they are constantly migrating, that they will ever

come here again.

There has been much speculation, particularly among writers of science fiction, on what would happen if aliens from other planets should invade Earth. Would they arrive as benefactors or as conquerors? Would we welcome them or would we overcome and capture them and put them in zoos and museums? Would we meet them in friendship or with hostility?

The margenes gave us the answer.

Beings from outer space came to Earth in 1960.

And we ate them.

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